

## Slip

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## Slip

by [Keturagh](#)

### Summary

Does he really hear the prayers of elves calling out across the Fade, or is Solas losing his mind? A shadow of his former self, in any case he is powerless to answer. It troubles him, but when he draws close to his vhenan he can use her to silence this embittered Dreaming. Still, he holds her at arm's length - until, one night, she offers him that most cherished of trusts, and he falters in his resolve.

# Stop

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She had invited him to give her comfort, just a shared warmth and the gentle intimacy of their hearts together before separating, as he wished, for the night. This pattern had become familiar enough to him now. He judged that it did neither of them any great harm, and indeed he had come to treasure the soft hours near her before he would drift away to his tent. Often she would trade with him poems, or wisdom on healing herbs, or idle gossip of their compatriots, until she drowsed. Then he would leave her. He would show restraint. This night he had joined her with a smile.

But though they'd spoken some, Pangara had become distant with pain. And so they were bedded quietly together like two sickles, her back facing him, he mirroring her curve on the bedding. Something in her was tight, a tension he wished to dispel.

The glow from the fire in the lantern fluttered across her ear. O, and he desired this distraction. It was a night in which he felt the world call up to meet him, and the sorrow trembled in each of his limbs, sat like a gag at the bottom of his throat, thrummed feverishly through his gut. To hear these whispers now - did he lay in the Fade, and this a vibrant dream? No, no - if he had to ask, he must be waking. So then were these petitions waking dreams, delusions pressed into his mind by the ages, or were these truly prayers that he could hear and not the fitful passes of a broken mind?

Visions twisted in him, whatever their origin. A human slaver spitting "knife-ear" to a servant he pressed over a spinning wheel; her raw-throated curse. A child fighting to remember his soul amidst the living death of the Qun, visiting all the names of his gods in his sleep. *Still, you are powerless*, a cruel voice whispered through him. Too feeble to do anything about those prayers crying out for deliverance from the desolate corners of this blighted earth. Too late for them; they are nothing, you can do nothing. Nothing.

He fought for control over a fresh torrent of supplication before entering the Inquisitor's tent. The rattling of these voices out of the Fade was not something he had endured before he slept, for he had been as any other of the People, though strong and known for his power. Had the ones who marked slaves carried such supplications always in their minds? He wondered if these whispers could have made them, towards their end, deranged enough to turn on their own. He certainly felt his mind unravelling.

He bent to rest his forehead in her hair, and at this touch, the whispers stilled. When he touched her, she banished the whispers of the hurt in the world. The Anchor? An effect of his magic reuniting with him through her body? Or just the strength of her being real, not of the Fade? Or, most likely, most distressingly, it was that he loved her that was distraction enough. Sometimes, when he focused, all it took was the thought of her to override the whispers in his mind. Fool, nerveless fool. Helpless to help any of them. *Powerless*. He pressed his eyes shut tight, crowding out all he must endure with the thought of a pure, bright image, the image that always met him now when he closed his eyes. Only her. Her lips. Her mouth, as he had bent to kiss her in the Fade.

He placed his lips against the back of her neck. She made a soft sound in the back of her throat, hairs rising along her smooth, warm skin.

Her sounds pressed into him, excited him. These were sounds he had heard her make before... but never under the ministrations of his hands. He wanted to hear her again. He liked the way that when she sighed, the other sounds of the world faded away, the sounds of the river and the wind in the

night, the sounds of the distant stars humming beyond the Veil, the sounds of the world slipping into its decay. Gone. Only her. Both of his hands slid down her sides, then cupped her ass. He squeezed, touching, not thinking, feeling the roundness of her gathered smoothly into his palms, allowing his mind to go blank. She sounded so sweet. It was in that moment his pelvis shifted across the careful space he'd left between their bodies and pressed against where his hands held her.

He hesitated, only a second, then the temptation was too great. He allowed his mind to sink back beneath the surface, he shifted his grasp to cup both of her hips and rock against her. His cock was pressed against the soft, round fullness of her ass, pressing through his sheepskin breeches at the cleft between her asscheeks.

Then the thought crested unbidden to his mind of what would appear to him if he bent her forward, and if he pinched the back of her neck in a vice-like grip, perhaps, and if he folded her down so that, if he were to roughly pull her smalls over the rise of her ass, he would have displayed to him the riverbed folds of her cunt, spread in the bush between her legs.

His hips bucked. He opened his eyes, and he noticed, as he fought for control over his errant physicality, that Pangara had pressed her hand between her thighs. His tongue moved on his lips. He felt a cuss in his throat as his eyes followed the length of her body down to where - yes - she pleased herself on the fingers of her right hand, rune-signing the very pearl he longed to take under his tongue and taste, to lick the sea from between her legs and hear her raise new sounds to the night.

This thought nearly made him spill into the fabric between their bodies. Like an inexperienced youth, like an animal at rut. His breath came in sharply and he squeezed his eyes shut, and allowed, for only a moment, for only a moment of abjuration, the thought of what he was doing to her, really - yes, there it was - to drain the desire from his mind, to fill him with the coal-like heat of guilt and abnegation. His hands slackened from her hips. He must adjourn to the privacy of his tent, set apart from hers, and take himself in hand, and cool this fire she had started.

She rocked back against him then in what was a clear and cruel seduction.

He had softened. He had pulled away. She lunged to close the space between them, pressing her ass back and full against his cock, rolling her hips with lithe, smooth motions that made his core tremble. He was starting to shake his head, murmur a reproachful "Vhenan.." when Pangara's gaze caught him. She was looking over her shoulder, and something scathing, something sarcastic and cynical, was in her eyes. It stiffened him. Incensed him. For all she had proven the vibrancy of her spirit, still he did not expect such bald insolence from her, nor this air of damning coldness.

In a mockery of the tone he had intended to use, she said, "Vhenan."

And he saw what it felt like when he pulled away from her, echoed back to him. It was cruel. She was right.

He grimaced, chastened under the thick thumb of guilt. He cupped her chin lightly. "Ir ab-" he started, but she shook her head, shaking him off. His hand fell away and he stopped speaking. She sat up. The energy in the room shifted. She studied him, flushed, redness in her cheeks and her hairline damp, her lips parted; and then one dimple appeared in her smile, then another.

Her smile thrilled through him. He couldn't help but smile back, adoring the impish joy of her, of knowing her, the happiness he felt to be near her and hear her speak, to see the glow of her eyes when she listened to his stories of his world. He adored the constant surprises of her insight, her clarity of intention, her measured judgement and merciful wisdom. She valued deliberation and

curiosity. She was hot with joy. He remembered her vividly in the spray of the mountain spring that morning, doubled-over at how the bar of soap had flown from her fingers and smacked into the back of his head, trying to stutter an apology but unable to speak between the whoops of laughter, her eyes watering with tears that glittered on her smile, clutching her stomach as she laughed. He had given her a great burden, yet still she thrived, in her own way forging a path to happiness.

Pangara knew she had struck true in him. It was enough.

She straddled him.

He shook his head in protest, too weak to speak. Still she put her finger to his lips, stalling him. “Give me this, please?” she asked.

She waited.

He could lift her from his lap. He could leave her tent and go, as he had so many nights before, back to the cold ground beneath his own bedroll, to take himself in his fist and pump the vision of her from his mind. Twice, some nights, and one night when his wanderings had found her in the Fade and he had almost let it go too far, he’d woken them both and then had set to himself a third time in the cupped hours of the early dawn, alone, working his rough desires from his heart so that he could face her by day and not press her against the nearest tree or rock, spreading her knees with his thigh, running his hands the length of her body, distracting her from the task that lay over her and distracting himself from the horrible hopelessness of it all. What she stirred in him he had not felt in an age. It was a depravity of spring she inspired in his heart, in his gut, made new life course through his veins, intoxicating, hot, vibrant. He looked up at her. Did she know what she did, when she caressed one finger lightly over the length of his ear?

He tipped his pelvis up against her and shuddered. His eyes closed. He should have told her to stop, but instead he murmured, “Vhenan...” and then her mouth was on his lips. She held him between her knees. He clung to her. This was juvenile play; over-the-clothes rubbing: this is what he had reduced them both to, the bulge at his crotch pressing sloppily into the divot riding up in her smalls. It felt rough, chafing, he knew in some part of his mind that he was uncomfortable but her eyes were heavy with lust - for *him* - her mouth was parted, spit connecting her top and bottom teeth, her hands touched from the top of his bare head to his shoulders, to his waist, around his back. She embraced *him*. She wanted *him*. He loved her.

She kissed him and then pulled away, her head tilting down. He followed her gaze and saw that she had pulled her smalls to one side and she fingered the rise of her pleasure as she pressed against him closely. He felt the warmth gathering in his lower gut, felt her heat pressing through his clothes, watched the outline of her hand duck beneath the band of her smalls and work what was exposed there in a furious rhythm. The fabric she had pushed aside was wrinkled and dark with moisture.

That is what undid him. He slid his arms around her and cupped her ass in both hands, the back of his head digging into the dirt beside the bedding they’d managed to somehow scuff away from. His hips lunged up against her. He tried to slow the pattern of his thrusts, but she squeezed his shoulder with her free hand and whispered something that could have been “more” in the human speech or “it’s time -” in the broken heritage of their shared tongue; either way he was breathing harder and gripped her hips and - and -

Stop.

It was a moment before he realized he had said the word aloud. Another brief space before he realized he’d actually uttered the command in Elven, another wingbeat before it registered to him

that his tone had been utterly despotic, the harshness of it still ringing in both their ears. Another breath before he saw she had, in fact, complied.

This vision of her was... superb. In the queer measure of time in which he commanded the energy of the room, he allowed himself the luxury of seeing her like this, storing the memory away for later *use*. She was poised above him, hand still clutched at her crotch, finger still pressed against her swollen clit. She breathed heavily, chest straining at her band; her frame was shaking, her skin pearly with sweat. Her hair was wild. He felt his face go soft, but held back the loving smile. O, in her eyes he saw the forbidden thing he had sworn to himself never to command, never to claim: obedience. It was there, steady in Pangara's gaze: supplication, submission.

No.

But, even as he resolved against it, he knew there was a shifting in the boundaries here that signalled something safe, something kind and good, held tenuously between them if he grasped.

Maybe, just this once -

It was decided in him before he could yank back the reins.

"I have not heard your request, vhenan." He modified the threat with light tone - cocksure, easy to pass off as a joke, to give her room to escape.

He left it there for her, suddenly feeling more raw and scared than he had any right to be in this moment, offering to take something he had forced himself to put down lifetimes ago - a measure of overt power over another living being.

Over a being he loved. It sickened him that he wanted this, wanted it with a heat that galled and unsteadied him. Not because of what this harmless play of the bedroom could do to her, but rather of what it implied of him and of his soul. Turmoil confronted him with six mocking eyes. Yes, he wanted control. Not only perfected over his own disposition, but enveloping her very being: her mind, her body, her spirit, all pinned beneath his teeth.

As much as any of them, there lived in his heart a master thrilling for disciples, did there not? Was that what this desire was truly built upon, at its foundation? Was he allowed to flirt with this power even in passing, even in the play and trust of love, when the desire itself revealed something so treacherous in his own being? When it showed the blood on his hands?

What she did next both thrilled and terrified him. She shook her head, murmured, "Please, Papae. Please, make me forget I exist. Help me abandon my ego, my pride. I am tired of leading. I am tired of the power. I know you can take it from me. I sense it in you. I wanted to sentence a man to death at Skyhold. I was furious, and I almost killed him just because I had the power to do it, and I know, it would have felt good. Break that person within me who would do such a thing with pride. Take that power from me. I divest of it. I hate it. Please, hold me. Help me. Break me."

He closed his eyes. His heart raced. The permission given. The request made. She wanted this too. She had known. He had not given her enough credit, a stupid mistake he kept making over and over, time and time again. She had seen him, and she had known him. She had been waiting for this moment, for him to offer what he could give. He reflected, thinking of all the Inquisition asked her to do and be for them, and realized she needed this; it was no passing taste, he understood too well what the burden placed on her entailed. What she asked was a song in her heart, a wish made from her soul, one he had resonated with not even recognizing her body's call.

This moment was stretching long and when he looked back to her he saw that she had moved her

hand to her knee and shifted to sit more comfortably astride him. She had her head lowered, waiting. And then she looked up and there was a relief, a softness in her eyes as she met his gaze that melted him. She looked giddy beneath her heady arousal, she anticipated his answer hungrily. Her appetite was contagious. He tried to suppress a small half-smile. They had found each other truly, then, at last. The potential promises here made his heart pound with want and lust and understanding; camaraderie together on a level they could not have shared before.

But if there had been danger before, so now was it not all the greater?

His viciously keen mind sought for a way to rationalize to the advantage of his desire. In moments the strategy was laid before him: you serve her. Assist her. She is the answer for what you have unleashed, the reparations, and you are her keeper. So, you help her. This is what she needs of you. What she asks of you, you are bound to provide to the *best of your ability*.

He knew it was madness to rationalize using this concocted logic.

He was ashamed that he let it sway him anyway. A trick played on himself. A justification to which he latched. He would have this touch; he must have her touch. For her, for her.

He only had to test the water. Did she understand? Did she come to him now in the same spirit?

"I hardly believe you are unaware of the Iron Bull's proclivities, Inquisitor," he said, "To meet your needs perhaps his attentions could serve."

His eyes widened and he stuttered into indistinct protests as Pangara pressed fingers to cover his mouth, sighing and laughing.

"No, Solas, Solas, stop there or do go, or do leave, for I won't hear that from you. You know this, that you are my heart. You are my heart, you silly halla. I hope you know that only you could carry me, in this. I give you the title. I give you the name, not the Iron Bull, not any of the other suitors I could afford my trust to. It's you. Only you."

He tried to hide his obvious pleasure at hearing what he wanted so much confirmed. This was not an arrangement entered into lightly, and she understood its import. To become?... to be for her...? Her confirmation, is what pushed him to finally nod, and he lifted her hand from his lips.

"Well then. Is there something you have prepared? A particular boon you'd ask me to administer?"

Her eyes lit with joy. It was naked, such vulnerable trust and delight. So electrifyingly real and pure. His guilt spasmed in his throat. "In fact," she said, and made to rise from him. He lifted her with outstretched palms, then propped on one elbow to watch her draw a bag from her pack. What she withdrew and placed before him made his eyes seek hers, sharply. She was already smiling.

"Nothing you're uncomfortable with," she said, "But this is what I want."

Rope. A length of cloth. A small jar of sewing needles and what appeared to be metal balls affixed to clasps. A thin crop. Some other items, but what caught his attention was a knife, and - *breathe* - a bit attached by soft leather reins to a collar.

He studied the items as she placed them on the ground in front of him.

He looked up at her. He saw how each item made her more nervous. But Pangara was possessed of her usual surety of movement, and he thought that she was not unsettled by revealing these requests to him. Rather, she smiled at her own boldness, but glanced at him only fitfully. Ah, so it was his reaction she was worried about. That he might not accept this about her. Or, more likely, that he

would not know what to do, and that she would have to teach him.

The lonely backwoods apostate flat-ear, fumbling to please.

*Oh, Vhenan.*

“No paddle,” he observed, reaching out to stroke the unusual softness of silk bindings in a land in which root-rope was more common.

“I have noted you’ve another preference, and wide enough hands” she said, wryly, and he couldn’t help but laugh.

“Indeed. You are more astute than I have been wise.” And though he said it ruefully he had meant for it to be a jest.

“Don’t say something so cruel,” she said. She cupped his chin in her hand, stroked his jawline, and he regretted not immediately leaving this tent before he had committed his heart to this endeavor. Cruelty. Indeed.

“No. You are right. Perhaps I have been more aware than I am proud to admit. Aware of what you... desired,” he said. And her smile seemed sadder. How did he keep doing that? What weight was he putting on these words, that she saw true to his sorrow during this, a most precious exposure?

This woman had unbalanced him, that was it. Again. He was still in the midst of his surprise. Pangara had set the gentlest of snares, and his traitorous heart had sprung the trap. He felt a sudden need to hold this time between them in the safety of his control once more. A moment to recover his carriage, his sanity. He sat up and reached out and before she could move he had drawn her into a close embrace. The implements were beneath them, and he carefully moved the knife aside so that it would not cut into her leg. He gathered her close with his other arm. He allowed himself to revel in this moment; he pressed his face into her neck, he rubbed his lips against her collarbone, her skin was soft and he could see the small jump of her pulse beneath her skin. “Vhenan, I want this,” he whispered, “I want this more than you know. It only - only, there is a danger. You will need to be very, very attentive to my commands.” Then she *shivered*, because she must have been expecting for him to leave her after all, and the small moan that escaped her crushed through him. His arms around her tightened, possessive. *Oh, fool, fool, you want this still.* “Only, no blood.” The words came out low, muffled into her skin. “Put the knife away, my heart. I am sorry, but our magics. There may be unreliable energy from the spilling of blood. Too similar to a ritual, the patterns I would carve in you. It might attract unwanted attention.” Might attract unwanted lusts. One warning, he gave himself. In all this play he must be vigilant not to mark her with blood. Never mark her permanently. One drop of her blood spilled, that is where he would place the signal bell, the warning to retreat before he could no longer return, before this was more than just satisfying the needs of the Inquisitor, and of giving solace to his heart.

Pangara laughed and agreed and when he looked at her he could not help but meet her smile. Foolish, love-struck, the both of them grinning. This was an asylum for them both; more than the light rubbing and hard kisses and embracing her for stolen moments. She rested her forehead against his. And he felt it; her elation, his own joy, the thrill of their shared hunt, the promise of a battle of his focus against hers stretching out into the night. The scheme came to him immediately, the map of her release, how he could serve her best this night.

“Are you prepared?”

She nodded. “I will call on the dawn star.”

So she was not untrained, to have given him her safe-word. He felt a rush fill his ears with noise. She fondled the curve of his ear and he leaned into her touch, just slightly. The glow from the Anchor lit the black in the back of his eyelids when he blinked. He breathed. Stilled. Opened his mind to the place of repressed appetites he'd kept carefully confined to private, uncomplicated fantasy. The thrill of it was there to greet him. But he embraced the fire now, leaning on her trust, rising into... there, there it was.

He rose into power.

He stood with one palm flat on the top of her head. He held her down so that she would remain kneeling. He pressed a hand gently over her hair. She let him do this; she was going to let him do this with her. His breath shook. He pulled from his left middle finger the solid silver ring that helped his spells crack through the enemy's armor and slipping it into the small pocket at his hip. He made certain that his thoughts were silent. He made certain that she was looking at him closely, eyes locked to his. He felt everything about his presence change, grow sharper and larger, command and control where the humble apostate had hunched before. And her eyes were so beautiful when she looked up at him this way. He felt now not like a weary man before a woman, but like a god before a queen.

He felt his heart hammering his ribs. He placed a hand beneath her chin. His grip tightened, one finger stroking along the side of her face gently. Her eyes grew heavy and she looked up at him with bright, craving trust. Only she could know him like this: only she could see what he could become and still know him for the man he aspired to be. Only she could still look at him, a despot, someone adept at giving commands and expecting them to be carried through, with clear eyes and her sweet smile. She had sat on the throne too. She knew the taste of power, and moreover she knew that violence was the only way to remove that power. She understood the way of the world. She asked him to guide her out of her own tyranny - for though her judgements may be sound, and her careful consideration most impressive, still the siren song of power would gnaw ever at her heels. He knew this all too well. He knew how to take from her that which she despised.

"My instruction," he said, "was to put the knife away. Never make me ask you twice. For anything." His backhand slammed into her cheek. The jawbone hanging from his neck swung with his shoulders.

She made hot sounds, and she shivered, and she licked her lips. In the lantern light, her eyes gleamed.

## Chapter End Notes

Hey, don't set up scenes this way. Generic reminder this is a fantasy and actual play involves lots of talking, negotiation, boundary setting, and technique practice. This is not meant to be true-to-life.



# Sip

## Chapter Notes

Dom!Solas would have four million alphabetically-catalogued opinions on rope.

He was not a man who solved problems with his fists.

Pangara, kneeling before him on the floor: she was not a problem.

She was a puzzle.

And his backhand was a tactician's advance into the dark squares of her need.

Like the sound of a sword sinking into a rain-soaked shield, he heard the smack before the pain would have had time to flare through her face. But the rush of humiliation would be instant and bracing. He had caught her completely unaware. She was loose and her neck whipped to the side to absorb a fair amount of the blow. Faultless aim, as was necessary for such a hit. He was strong, but this woman had taken a troll's foot to the chest - he knew she could absorb the blow. An afterburn of tingling rose through her cheek, pink, and it looked like she fought to swallow around a sudden, huge lump in her throat.

She righted herself slowly.

Her breath was shallow. Were her shoulders shaking? He tensed.

And then she turned her head to tip up to him the side of her face still hale.

*Good.*

"Not necessary, my heart," he let his tone glow with appreciative warmth. "Demonstrate that the lesson is learned."

When she spoke her tone was rasping, clearly at least part-stunned by the ferocity and speed of his induction. "Alright, *Papae*," she said and made as if to stand.

But he held out a palm in the air between them. "No."

And Pangara stilled, looking up at him with curiosity.

He indicated the knife with a lift of his chin, unable to withhold a small grin. "You will earn the right to stand if you manage to please me, da'len."

A purely mischievous gleam entered her eyes, though she ducked her gaze to his feet quickly enough that he could tell she was trying to hide it, perhaps uncertain if insolence would displease him. "Sure, *Papae*."

And the sway she gave to him in her hips as she crawled across the ground pleased him greatly.

He savored watching her. When she reached the knife she stretched her front in an angle that gave him a clear outline of her smalls stretching around the trace of her cunt - and while he felt his cock

swelling, his head leaning back, he was serene giving the instructions: “Pick it up by the handle. With teeth. Turn. Ah, slower. *Yes*, slower - and mind you don’t drop the blade laughing, da’len, pay attention... Drop it in the bag.”

Pangara performed each step with such debauched concentration, lounging onto hands and knees like a cat after midday, the leather handle of the knife clenched in her jaw. He reached up and lazily twisted his fingers to put his weight on the ridge pole of the tent, cocking a hip comfortably, enjoying the slink and vibrancy of her performance. She did exactly as he asked. The knife dropped into the bag.

He knew her attention would be focused on making certain she did not cut herself, and so he chose that moment to move up behind her and reach down around her middle, hooking her in his arms and pulling up just enough to give her a bit of discomfort, his mouth close to her ear.

“Do you seek to intrigue me, da’len?”

“Mm-mm, *Papae*,” her voice was an uncanny music to his ears, “Only to please you.”

That drew a chuckle from him. “Fascinating. I could almost believe you have been tamed. So, shall we test your restraint?”

He moved certain parts of her compliant body, feeling here the space between her shoulderblades, here the smooth give of her stomach, running his hands down her thighs, maneuvering her hips with greater attention than was strictly necessary. Made certain her knees were safe. He rearranged her balance, pushed her soil-coated feet so that they pressed into points. He had been supporting her transition into the pose with his body. When he stepped back and studied how she took the balance, he found the result acceptable. And then he said each word slowly, crouching to ensure she heard him:

“Do. Not. Move.”

He stood and left her, back turned. The rope needed to be considered; he picked it up and judged its length. He observed the ends, noted width, and performed two efficient test knots on his own forearm, pulling tight and then releasing, cataloging shape, size, and slip. It was flat-braided, not unlike Antaam-Saar, which he found distasteful but could salvage for this night. And a root weave would be preferable, but he could adjust the tying for the extra give and this did fit with his decision to reduce the number of marks on her skin. At least there was no core.

And all this time while his back was turned, a frantic sensuality pulsed through his body. He resisted the urge to check if she blatantly disregarded his command. Did she slouch in apathy, intending to draw out further punishment? She would not like the result if so. The question of her devotion rang through his mind, setting the hairs of his neck on end. And if the pose was too difficult, he would learn there too.

His ears were sharp for the sound of any untoward pain. The nearby rolling of the stream seemed excruciatingly loud. And though he revelled in the quiet spaces of the world, something haunted this night. There: something trickled into his thoughts in this moment where she was not before him to fill the space of his attention. A voice, a cry, a warning spoken to a hot-headed youth wandering beyond the light of the night’s fire. Solas gritted his teeth, sneering at the vision, and pinched the bridge of his nose in concentration. He was uncertain how to categorize this manifestation. A dozen other calls crowded behind, queuing for his idle mind. Spirits? Or dreams...? To fill his mind, he needed something.

“Tell me what you know of... this, please, *Papae*,” Pangara said, her voice taut with focus.

Yes. Perfect.

“*Vas’lath*,” he spoke into the night, thrumming with the memories, feeling expansive, suddenly yearning. The voices ceased. He breathed. He spoke slowly, measuring the rope palm to palm. “Another of our crafts taken and hollowed by imitation by those who took the Elvhen People as slaves. But... in the deep memories of the Fade...

"I have seen a king suspended in webs cascading from beams carved on high; taller than mountain peaks were these wonders. The rope was threaded with metals and jewels unknown by all the lands. He cried in exquisite agony, and his tears turned to snow as they fell.

"I have watched a courtesan lifted on a bed of woven rose stems. Piercing her shoulders were hooks etched of dawnstone. Her lover walked beneath her and, one by one, tugged each stem free. Then she pressed each thorn through skin and kissed the mark there. She moved with the most tender care imaginable. The roses would not wilt for their love.

"I beheld thirty servants joined together, ascending as a grand stair round a tree. Their master ascended with sure foot on the steps carved by their bodies. The breaths that they breathed came as one, and around them shuddered all the leaves. The forest trembled to witness such devotion."

He turned back to look at her. He felt his face flush with heat.

How he desired to *sketch* her. Like few strengths he had seen before, the twist was held aloft. Her body did not tremble, did not falter. He even thought - had he brought the book and charcoal? The angle there, the way the light - that fall of cloth. He ached to capture her form with paints, imagined tracing a brush through the space between her thighs. He thought of painting her lips with honey, imagined licking her while she held this pose for him; like sipping from a chalice. What could he reduce her to, through his ministrations?

She drew a breath and her stomach expanded slowly. He recognized the pacing.

He could push her harder.

What he wanted was to push her to the ground.

A fitful glow from the lantern illuminated a gleam of wet on her thigh.

So. She had been listening.

He resisted the urge to kneel behind her and lap the dew from her skin, to plunge his fingers into her cunt and fuck her wild until she tumbled from the pose panting and begging for his mercy. He would not give it; his mouth would follow her to the ground and he would drive into her and suck over her and rub his tongue upon her until she bent back and howled and snarled and her voice turned into the moon and her cunt into a tide that he could pull, pull, between his lips and then release across the whole of the earth and drown everything except his name choked through her teeth.

He let it live in fantasy, sucked a phantom taste of salt on his tongue.

And then he spoke over the quiet hum of her meditative breath, wanting her to hear the kindness of this awakening.

“Focus on the bright light of your mana in your mind. Inhale. Praise the good work of your body, which has not failed you. As you exhale, release to the ground. Stand and approach me, da’len.”

She released the hold slowly, but did not appear to be dawdling. No. She was adjusting carefully, for it had not been an easy pose. She stood. Where before she had seemed still giddy, this had sobered her. Excellent. She was centered, her weight distributed evenly as she walked to him with her eyes on the ground.

Now here was a behavior she would unlearn. Solas placed his hand under her chin. He held it but loosely, for this had been established as a gesture of absolute authority and he needn't stress the point. Her eyes were downcast.

He spoke with sugar and warm fire, as if he could translate the breadth of his adoration for her in tone alone. "I will see the beauty of your eyes when you offer respect to me, *vhenan*. Look at me with all your spirit. I do not wish to see you tremble except with the ache of your own pleasure."

She snapped her gaze up to meet his and he felt his head fall back just slightly, re-appraising her. Ferocity, a keen knowing that unsettled him for a moment. Then he realized: she dared him to make her tremble thus.

"Listen, *Papae*, 'all of my spirit' is not a thing I am convinced you can command."

"Ha!" She had not expected him to laugh, and her confusion swayed between offended and hurt. The pride drained from her eyes.

He cupped both hands around her face and pressed his lips to her forehead. "That is because I have not yet broken you, *vhenan*. You can play at domestication, but I am not so easily deceived.

When I harness you, my heart, there will linger in your mind no question of who commands you."

She eyed him sideways, maybe thrown by the kind humor in his voice and piqued that her prod had not engendered another hit. But he would not indulge this; he remembered the vague exhaustion she had carried in her shoulders as she'd walked up the steps to speak with Dorian earlier that week. Pangara had spoken with the researcher as well, and then met Leliana at the top of the tower and had gone over in hushed, taut whispers the decisions made at the war table that day. To him she had spoken a passing word, promising to speak later, but he had seen how weak she felt, how drained and frightened. Now she curled her toes under her feet and stretched all the little connections between bone and muscle as she stood before him. Her carriage; her frown; the things she chose to say to him, to reveal, to imply. He assessed the pieces she had provided. And his initial assessment held; he would press her just so.

"Stand, Inquisitor. Square your shoulders."

There it was. The smallest distaste in her eyes at hearing the title. But she complied.

He was limited by the tent and by the rope, but both should be sturdy enough.

He did not undress her fully, which was intentional. He liked the thought of her cream cooling in the hammock of her smalls. But he did remove her band. It was not quick. He stepped closer to her, looking down, towering, really, over her, drinking in the way her eyes leaned up to meet his. He held his hands together behind his back. This recalled to him the moment she had tied his heart to hers - when he had realized that to part from her was an unbearable -

*guilt*

- thought, and he had resolved himself to the pain of knowing her love.

He shut the shadows from his mind. He would not allow that. He would not allow them to continue

if all he felt when he held her were the pangs of guilt. Guilt; a dangerous distraction. It could signify nothing other than an end and right now he *could not* end it; the pressing fear of all he did not understand pushed him to her. He thought... he thought she would understand.

She wiggled her nose as if it itched, and the simple unexpected endearment was so sweet; he shook his head and pulled her to him, ran his hands down her shoulders and around her back. *Vhenan, vhenan*. He kissed her. Sucked her bottom lip. She leaned to one side and pressed her mouth up towards him with a hunger; their teeth bumped together when their mouths opened and the wet heat of her filled his head.

*Back*; he had to leave it. And as he stepped away he raised one brow and let his gaze drop.

Pangara looked, exclaimed, and though he aimed for his expression to be carefully stoic, he could not help his eyes crinkling as she looked from her chest to the band in his palm.

“Yes, vhenan? You may speak.”

“When did you - ?” But she caught herself, shook her head, laughed. “I didn’t feel it. I don’t know if I should be impressed or confused.”

This perplexed him a moment, but then he remembered that he was a reclusive apostate ascetic with, apparently, a talent for removing women’s underclothes unremarked.

Ah. Well...

“So you are of a mind that I have no surprises for you?”

She shook her head. “No, not in the least, *Papae*.”

“Excellent! Then I’ll not disappoint.” And he held the band up. “Turn around.”

He tied the band around her eyes. She tried to press her ass back up against him but he held her fast, gave her a light shake, indulged her with a gentle “No,” breathed into her ear. And *just that* was enough to make her pant and shiver, so it was clear he would need to arrest her focus away from him and inward, back down into the meditative emptiness of her release from herself.

But that would come later. First...

He reached around her body, grasped both her wrists in one hand firmly, spun her to face him, and lowered her to the ground.

“Elbows together,” he said lightly.

A pinpricking like claws flexed into his heart as she murmured her assent. The initial rush of their coming together in this night had smoothed in his mind. From the racing of his heart to the strain of his cock in his breeches, he was painfully aware of how much he wanted this, how he had in his actions directly engendered this moment. He wondered - was all he did for her now, this sudden, deliberate intimacy, born of unforgivable selfishness?

But he admonished the thought. He had made her aware of his desire, and she had drawn him out to meet her. The courting dance of Vas’lath as he remembered it from before the dreaming, before the insurrection, before the war and endless bloodshed. Had the Dalish kept this teaching? It reasoned, he thought with no small bitterness, that sex and base passions would be what endured. Lose one thousand teachings, but recall the rituals of lust.

... Not that he didn't appreciate it at the moment.

Solas ran his fingers through her hair, pushing it out of her face. Then he formed the first column with the rope. He began at her wrists, tying and looping and knotting an elegant braid down the center of her forearms. The ropes crossing in patterns and frictions around her arms evoked leaves and the bell-shapes of Crystal Grace. He drew his fingers along her skin in advance of the knots, tantalizingly soft. He emphasized the smoothness, the bareness of her skin before blanketing it with the rope. This was a close-knit and thick binding. He spoke into the rope, placing magic for ice dormant in the knots. She smiled when he touched her, tilted her head to one side. And when he pulled on the rope her arms raised together, and the pack was close and beautiful. He cupped his hand along the side of her face and felt an agonizing wash of tenderness.

But through it, the certainty of his control steadied his mind.

He raised her into kneeling.

Next he looped the pieces around her shoulders, across her back. And then he set to work on the harness, which was delightful labor, in no small part because of the hitching in her breath and the moans he elicited when he breathed onto her skin. His fingers looped around her breasts in lazy circles. He teased lighter and lighter, refusing to touch the hardening tips of her nipples - though she whispered most impressive entreaties. When he had her hips rocking forward involuntarily, he closed the tie of the harness in a braided column mirroring the braid that rigged her arms, continuing down her stomach and kissing her skin as he worked lower and lower ahead of the rope until he was poised above her smalls.

He nudged her legs apart with a knee. Passed the rope between her legs to his other hand around her back. He was close to her; this was nearly an embrace.

Her bound arms were pressed against his chest. He rested his chin on the rope harnessing her shoulder.

She became very still, almost as if she feared he would flee.

Not all Vas'lath was performed with this closeness. But to be near her, to tease her, to heighten for her each sensation of the tightening he bound about her? It was ecstasy. No words between them broke the night. The quiet was full of their breaths. It was as a conversation born between minds, a dance performed on the skin.

He shifted closer to her. Pressed his erection against her knee.

She spoke then.

*"Fenedhis."*

"Mmm. Mhm."

He tugged slow and gentle on the rope.

She moaned.

He let the rope slack, then slowly pulled again.

*"Solas."*

Her lips, he saw, were chapped and parted. He reached down with his free hand between her legs to

the soaked material of her smalls. Two fingers fluttered along the rope. He knew she would feel the thrum in the line. He raised the wet he collected from the rope to her lips, massaged it like oil into the cracks as her tongue darted out to graze his touch.

He slacked and pulled the line.

Her body rolled and he had to stifle a pleased moan.

Turning his lips to her ear, when he spoke it was as into a night of freshly-fallen snow. "Are you thinking of me, vhenan?"

She nodded sharply. The fabric covering her eyes brushed his temple. He felt bright with each touch, hiding the longing inside of him behind an even, clinical tone. "So. You savor being wrapped in darkness, bound, with a cock pressed against your leg. That is of a certain... academic interest."

He slackened and pulled the rope gently again. The rope would be pulling just-so against her cleft; her quickened breathing confirmed where the rope was pressed. He looked over her shoulder down at the rise of her ass, running the fingers of one hand down her spine while his other fist bunched around the end of the rope and he slowly, slowly pulled.

She sounded sharper, and the rope was pulled tight, digging up against her smalls, and then she started rocking against the knot that this tension in the rope had moved over her clit.

He kept the rope taut, pressing the base of her spine just slightly to encourage her movement while he bit the lobe of her ear between his teeth. She gasped; his tongue darted out over the delicate skin. Her rocking strained at the rope so that he had to hold the working end with a firm grip, the muscles all along his arm flexing so that she could grind upon the knot with the precise pressure and angle she desired. She bore into the sensation until the majority of her weight balanced upon the rope. Her hips rolled and lunged back and forth, and he continued to breathe into her ear - scraping his teeth along the soft skin and, when she made bright and ardent sounds, lingering on certain places or with a certain pattern of sucking, biting, gentle nipping, or nuzzling. Not all ears acted as such proxies for the sexual tremors of the aroused; he was pleased to discover hers did.

Her body was growing slick with sweat. She leaned her weight forward onto him, bound arms enveloped in his embrace, the harness holding her shoulders tight and unmoving. He kept the rope tight between her legs while she rubbed the knot against her clit for her pleasure, grinding slower and faster at her whim. The small cries in the back of her mouth grew rapid, urgent. He spoke into her ear, recalling to her, infusing his voice with a sly, imperious danger: "I have not heard you ask, vhenan."

She gasped but said nothing and did not slow her pace, as if she were so possessed of wantonness that she could not hear him as she could not see him.

When, after a moment, it became clear that she had no intention of requesting release, he jerked the rope with a sudden vicious strength.

"Ah!" She squirmed, but her bondage interfered with her ability to twist away. Then she said quickly, before he could speak again, "Please, please *Papae*. I ask permission to come."

"Describe how."

"I - I want to press myself against the rope until I come."

"You wish to rub your climax from the *Vas'lath*." He did not keep the gloat from his voice. "While

I whisper sweetly into your ear? Is that it?"

"Yeah, *Papae*," she had already begun fitful lunges against the rope, but he dropped the knot slack from her body whenever her hips rolled.

"Ah. Is there a term for such shameless debasement, I wonder. Begging to fuck a rope - what wouldn't you screw for your release?" And each time he let a crass word fall in the velvet tone of command, he loved the way she tensed and leaned in for more.

"*Isalan - isalan...*" she couldn't speak further, only whined when he let the knot slack away from her cleft after a teasing lift, saying again, "Please."

"Yes," he granted, finally, and grasped her to him, then pulled the rope tight against her with enough speed to make her cry out. He directed her hips to move with one hand cupped on her ass and he brought his mouth hot against her ear and he whispered, "Yes. Your pleas are so sweet, vhenan, da'len, my heart. Let me hear your cries echo off the stars, your body is trembling; when you come it will be my voice you hear in the dark and thrumming cyclone of your ecstasy. Come," he ducked his tongue around and then into her ear, and then breathed against her, filling her mind with his voice, holding her securely as she groaned and thrust and rubbed her sex on the Vas'lath between her legs. "Come, yes, tremble for me just so." He captured her rhythm with light, non-intrusive tugs on the line. Just enough to keep his presence in her mind. She was grinding, panting, bound body in his embrace, head tilted back casting her bound eyes up to the night. "Tremble just so, vhenan, for me. I will paint upon your soul a sky of pleasures, I will plunge into you until the sky falls as moonwater into your cup. Come. Now." he instructed. And she shuddered to his words; the rough-shod spasms of her pelvis crested and evened into the stiff, regular rhythm of orgasm pumping through her body while he spoke in ancient poems words she would not know. He held the rope tight to rub her clit through her last bucking wave of passion, her strangled sounds a sweet music.

And, oh; he knew it was not the last time he would thrill to see her thus. But it was the first, and he feared she would feel his swiftly-beating heart pounding through the ropes pressed against his chest. Was glad she could not see the way he looked at her now.

He rested his forehead on her shoulder. Pangara gasped and slumped against him.

She was a glory and a marvel.

And he would unravel her completely.

But he allowed himself to hold her, now, and it was a comfort to have her: so warm, and real, and close.



## Stretch

Solas left her quietly. He pushed her back on her knees and then he slipped away.

Pangara made a confused sound, after a moment, in the back of her throat.

She reached out.

But she was bound, so all she could do was lift the column of rope around her forearms until the slack between her arms and the harness around her shoulders pulled taut.

He kept his eyes tracked on her, careful not to make any noise as he stalked to her pack.

Her mouth opened. Then - she reconsidered. Seemed to want to speak. Or to turn her head. But her eyes were still covered by the band.

He knelt at the pack and sifted through its contents, careful to make no noise.

He withdrew the knife. He found and replaced it in its sheath and tucked the blade into his belt. Then he took out her waterskin, uncapped it, and drank. He cupped a splash into his hand and pressed the cool water over his head, ran his hand over his face, around the back of his neck. Crouching, he looked over at her and inhaled a shaky breath. Her head swiveled slightly, attentive.

He judged the fall of his own shadow from the lantern and circled her, still quiet, until he found a place where the light would not cast in a way that she might perceive the changed darkness through the fabric of the band.

And then he sat, leaned against one of the struts of the tent, pushed aside his shirt, reached beneath the band of his breeches, and took himself in hand.

It was a certain kind of cruelty to leave her there, he knew. First, he had not completed the Vas'lath. The working end of the rope draped on the ground. Her arms were bound from elbow to wrist. Her shoulders were bound in harness. But the braid descending down her torso hung loose and there would be no sense of security in the way the line drooped there. But also, he judged that she would be sensitive after her orgasm and the work he would set her to next was not intended to be painful in that way.

Second, there was a... a resonance, here. Of something he knew may... but did not *have* to... but *could*... if things did not...

Solas watched her wait for him.

He studied how she did it. She was still. Then she twitched, moved. Like trying to see him passing by. She looked... vulnerable. But also questing. Like she wanted in on the game, but did not know the rules. He disciplined his breathing into silent, shallow breaths, and cupped his hand to his mouth and let a long drip of spit drop into his palm. He moved the hand under his breeches and smoothed the spit around his shaft, wrist circling in a practiced twist. When she had been at the height of her pleasure, rolling her bunched smalls against the Vas'lath and wrenching her hips and her whole body had arched and curled, he'd been pressed in torment against her leg. This would do. He needed the indulgence of a moment. The thrusting into his hand was slow; he gripped too hard, the pumps regular but restrained - deliberate, forceful.

She knelt in such a way that her spine curved to give a rise to her ass, her legs tucked under her and

knees splayed wide apart so that he could imagine stroking his whole hand against her from front to back. Her roped arms were connected to the roped harness around her shoulders and breasts - her breasts he'd tied in such a way as to emphasize her nipples hard in the night air. Although her eyes and most of her upper face were covered he could see how she was flushed from her release. Leaking from the sides of her smalls he saw the moonwater of her sex dripping down her legs.

*Ah.*

He strained his shoulders back, allowed the pace to quicken, eyes hungry on this image of her. Still, he held himself too tight, too rough, too little lubrication on his palm so that it almost hurt to beat this lust from the base of his stomach up to the tip of his pulsing shaft. It was - punishing, he realized with a detached regard. His other hand hooked his breeches away from where he worked the length of his cock. And he let his hand pound faster, so that it was agony, distressing and difficult, when he finally determined through the rising heat of his core that he had to - now was the moment - *stop*. He let go, his cock smacking up against his belly, precum bubbling weakly from his tip as he stopped himself mid-effort. The pain blossomed through his testicles and familiar, peculiar satisfaction mixed with the ache. He took a shaky breath and pulled his breeches up so that the waistband pressed his cock against his torso. Then he placed both hands flat, closed his eyes tightly, let his head press back against the strut, and regained control over his lust. He swallowed. Re-centered his intention. Then he opened his eyes and looked to her again.

It appeared she had heard enough to... perceive his recreation. She was turned to where he sat. And he felt a dry amusement to see her mouth slack with what appeared to be shock.

"It cannot be so remarkable," he said, and she closed her mouth and seemed to struggle a moment for what to say.

"Please, *Papae*, tell me if there is some service I can perform."

"You already are."

To his surprise, a pink flush bloomed across her cheeks.

He couldn't help a certain bitterness in his tone. "You have always inspired an exceptional failing of my restraint, *vhenan*."

A beat. He thought of how he should have kept his distance, but had been so thrilled when she'd awoken. How he should have been cold, guarded as the weeks passed; but she'd surprised him with questions. Expressed an evocative and almost-familiar wisdom in her actions that had made him want to trust her.

Then want to love her.

And then her lips crooked into a wicked grin.

"You've always - ? You mean, when you've left me at night and gone back to your own tent - ? Solas, I am both flattered and irritated beyond *belief*."

"Excuse me?" He bridled.

Pangara shook her head. "Oh what, *hahren*, do you think I have been doing when you go?"

Oh. Well... it wasn't as if he'd never considered it, no.

"Thinking about that... did not help my restraint, actually." He stood and brought the waterskin to

her.

“Maybe I don’t want you restrained,” she teased, and drank gratefully. He dried a dribble from the side of her mouth with his sleeve. “That was... difficult,” she admitted. He set the waterskin aside. He could tell a frown creased her brow beneath the band.

“My apologies. Only with the Vas’lath, I doubt your grip. I could adjust the hands.” He idly stroked the rope near her wrists.

She shook her head.

“No, not that. I meant when you left, or let me think you’d left. That wasn’t easy for me.”

He looked at her.

And was, again, very glad she could not see his face.

He cleared his throat and spoke to abate the pounding in his head. “I will indicate my presence in the future. I did not know if it would - for some, the experience can be...” but he *couldn’t*, he could *not* manifest a logic that would not betray some despicable motivation to his actions. *Were you expecting her to say she liked it?*

Pangara groped out softly until her fingers found his chin. And she smiled.

“You are extraordinary, Solas. Thank you for letting me tell you. And thank you for granting me my pleasure.” She laughed. “Please, continue. After all, *Papae*” she spoke slyly, “you were right about my trembling. It seems I’ve done something to impress you.”

Her words spoke through his doubt and alarm and steadied him like the river washing a rock up onto shore. He pressed a kiss into her unmarked palm, reverent. The self-effacing reprimands filling his mind calmed and he established again, for himself, the boundaries and pathways of the night ahead.

She restored the mantle of power to him with her words.

“You’ve no idea, my heart,” he said, softly.

Then he clutched her chin in one hand.

He shoved her head back, rushed, hard.

He bit her exposed throat. Brisk. Aggressive. Bunched the skin in his teeth; possessive. Tasted salt and the dirt of the road.

She gasped and for a brief second their magicks met together in the air and sparked with a smell of atmosphere and fire singing bark.

He sucked. Hard. Hard enough to make the skin crack pink beneath his lips.

He pulled back, thumbed over the mark he’d made. It would fade in a few mornings’ time, but she would remember until then. He allowed himself to forgive this mark upon her as a standard of what was to come between them in the unfolding night. His control, he decided, had not slipped; after all, if he was to use the crop there would be welts, bruises. This was not dangerous. No blood. And he had learned that he could push her harder than he’d first considered. He felt ice spreading in his mind, connecting with the dormant glyphs woven into the knots of the Vas’lath.

“Indeed,” he said, “I have been pleased with your work thus far, vhenan. But, impressed? ... No.”

She made a distressed sound.

“Mm, yes. I expect you would like to change that. However. Your mistakes have been manifold, Inquisitor.”

Her lip twitched down.

“Decisions you regret. Choices you question. You have the audacity to believe your mistakes are forgotten? Forgiven?”

Hesitation; yes, this was different from what had come before. The energy between them shifted into something slick and sharp. She seemed not to know how to respond, then her head shook. Her posture slumped and the tension he had sensed earlier: it coiled around her core.

He slipped a finger under the rope at her wrists, near the curve of her elbow, checked for swelling, chill, discoloration. He pinched the end of her middle finger and observed how the skin filled with pink. He noted that her knees had lost some color.

“I think not,” he mused. “I think that, though you posture in a position of surety, of confidence, you suspect that you are unworthy of pardon. Even small missteps in social grace - humiliating. And the greater trespasses. They haunt you?” She started to wriggle, frowning now, but he kept his grip on her chin and pressed, “You lean on your advisors. But the lives are lost on your orders, Inquisitor. Sons you cannot return to mothers. Arriving too late to save a burning homestead. A decision made to sacrifice your people in service of a greater good. A greater good that *you question exists.*”

Pangara was moving more frantically now, restricted by the Vas’lath. He knew where to place each word; after all, his own paths were well-worn. She had not expected this: to hear the soft, vicious disdain in his tone, to be confronted with her anxieties.

“You punish yourself, Inquisitor.”

He said it lightly. Still, she tensed.

He drew close to her ear. He spoke low.

“That is my job now.”

She snarled, shoving him away. “No.”

*Fascinating.* And entirely expected. One thing she would not easily, gladly yield to him. Yes, she *would* guard her remorse, cloister it selfishly. Let it nurse. Let it injure her spirit. Make her into a thing that could be shattered.

Pangara was too wise to bear the grief of this world carelessly. But he knew she called this care ‘weakness,’ and despised it. He worshipped her spirit even as it turned the knife upon itself. And so he would take the blade.

He identified the breadth of her resistance.

He stood, wrenched her up to her feet, and grabbed the front her harness.

He twisted his wrist and the glyphs flared to ice.

“Agh!”

“Repeat that mistake at your peril, Inquisitor.”

“*Don’t* call me that,” she spat, choking.

Twist.

“*Auuugh!*” A higher pitch of pain. The ice cooled the air in wafts. It would feel like fire on her skin, the blue glimmering florettes blooming on the knots so cold as to burn pink circles into her flesh. Being deprived of her sight would make the sensation of cold more intense, her body’s rejection of the sudden drop in temperature an unbearable shock.

He felt her claw sloppily at the Veil to pull up a barrier and he dispelled the effort with an impatient wave of his hand.

“Move to deny me again and regret it.”

“Is that a threat?” She was hunched over, lip curling as she tilted her head up. Her breath hitched from the cold. How he longed to see the fierceness of her rebellion reflected in her gaze.

“A statement of fact, Inquisitor.” Solas melted the ice, pulling energy from the Fade to redirect the warmth of the room back into those spots of her skin burned by the cold.

He released the hold on her chest and spun her around, grabbing crudely and roughly at the working end of the Vas’lath between her legs. He let his fingers briefly scrape against her smalls.

She fought. He felt her fierceness growing like a river gorged on snowmelt; she needed to fight him. He pulled the rope tight against her cunt and worked efficiently around her torso, webbing her spine to the braid down her stomach in a few simple, sturdy frictions. She jerked in his grasp, small sounds of protest crying from her throat as his hands shifted her sharply one way and then another. He felt his cock twitch, but the body was a secondary consideration here.

Their strengths pushed against each other. He made to move her roughly, she stiffened. He pressed the back of her head. She knocked his hand away with a whip of her neck. He struggled to keep her still; she challenged against him, both of their breaths becoming labored.

It was with an effort of will that he pulled himself out of the rapture of this melee, the intimate dance of counters, blocks, and shifting targets as she tried, in a thousand small ways, to lash out and he restrained her.

Finally, the upper work of the Vas’lath was complete. He breathed heavily, feeling foolishly surprised by just how powerful she was, even tied. Sweat cooled his brow. He circled around to check the bindings across her stomach.

She tried, again, to twist away from him. He dropped the rope and grasped her by both shoulders and shook her, all pretense of elegant duel abandoned. Her breasts wobbled in the harness and her bound arms shoved against his chest and he shook her harder until she cried out, aching, tortured, and ceased to buck against him and stood sullen and still.

He relaxed his grip with an irritated sigh. As if a pigment, applied to the plaster, had altered shade.

“How disagreeable you have become.”

She squirmed, hunched in the ropes, lips pursed. He frowned. Evaluated.

Delivered an open-palm smack to the side of her face, more sting than power behind the blow.

She gasped and shuddered, unable to withhold a yearning moan. Two dark spots of wet stained the band covering her eyes.

*Tears. Tears of a man crying out while they invade his - mind - they strip his - mind - they gouge out the places of his - mind - where he heard the Spirit's singing and - loved - the man cried, he cried out, he cursed the minds crawling in his mind crushing through his - mind - tears...*

*Intrusion.*

Pangara's voice pulled Solas back into the tent, into his body, into his mind. From the... vision from the Fade? *Prayer?* part of him wondered. But he quelled that madness. No. No. And the paths he walked to address his agents were always sealed as he left them behind. That the man had seemed familiar? Coincidence. What was... what was happening to him? Why could he not find peace?

She spoke again. He heard her this time. The flickering from the lantern seemed too bright. "Forgive me, *Papae?*"

He realized he had released her and was cradling his head. It was good she was blindfolded. After a moment of quiet wherein he struggled against the tortures of the waking dream, questioning everything it could have meant, Solas pulled her to him and held her tight.

He resisted the desire to caress the blindfold away and to kiss her eyelids - gently, each in turn. Had there been a connection between what he had made her feel with that hit and the vision that had overwhelmed him? Did she feel that he sought to... make her Tranquil? All of his spirit recoiled at the thought. *Despicable.*

An edge of worry touched her tone when Pangara asked again, "*Papae!* Will you forgive me?"

He forced himself smile so that she would hear love in his voice when he reminded her gently, "That is not the question at present, Inquisitor."

But he could so rarely deceive her - he had learned to guard each word around her and still she pressed through to his emotions, always. He could tell that she stiffened as she heard the sadness in his voice, the retreat, his spark of uncertainty and fear.

She shoved him, square in the chest.

He stumbled back, grunted.

She sneered, scoffed, cocked a hip, cloying apology gone, even bound and blindfolded all show and prowl. "Always questions." And Pangara jerked her chin to show him her other cheek, a challenge, a request - permission, he realized. Affirmation.

Then... his vision was an aberration. Perhaps something growing stronger. Something that, even with his attention locked to her, could still pierce into his concentration. She knew to call on the dawn star, and she mocked him to raise his ire. To push him to push her.

He was shaken.

But she needed him.

He let his eyes wander down her body. Appreciated her looped and roped, bound and bare except

for her smalls, all braids and tensions and knots and smooth skin indented by the rope like fingers dimpling a ripe peach. It came over him like a storm threatening to break his control. He wanted to retreat into her. Sink against her and rock into her and kill the wandering in his spirit and his mind and find peace in the slick warmth between her legs. The physical comfort of her warmth, the abandon of her being whole and real and entirely herself before him. He could press her, challenge her, fight her - without harming her. He *wanted* this.

But she needed him.

Solas bent and collected the working end of the rope from the ground. He spoke carefully.

“You are not one to scorn questions, Inquisitor. But your questions have become... addled in your mind.” He unsheathed the knife. “Your mind uses questions as weapons. Demands explanations. Tortures you for answers. The answer is always only this: that this world is cruel, and terrible things happen in it.” He cut the rope and worked the tail into the final decorative knot, like finishing off a knit. “And that is not your fault. But your mind,” he passed the remaining rope hand over hand, re-checking the measurement, then used the knife to slice it into two equal lengths, “rejects this fundamental truth. And so you take the ills of the world as your burden.” He sheathed the knife back into his belt. “You are convinced you deserve to be punished. Very well. The punishment shall be dealt. And then, you will let these fears go,” he walked behind her and roped first her right ankle, then her left ankle, braided in separate double-looped cuffs, each with a long tail. “You will be free.”

Before she could respond, he grasped her under her arms and used the advantage of his superior height to lift her. She struggled, squirming, confirming that she was not so remorseful for her previous behavior that she would submit control to him just yet. He rotated so that they faced the side of the tent, grunted, and swept her legs out. He flattened her to the ground. He cradled her head from impacting on the floor but allowed the rest of her body from the neck down to smack into the dirt. She sobbed, the sound more surprise than anything else.

He worked grimly. Reached under and pulled her bound arms up over her head so that her fingers pointed down her spine. The edge of the Vas'lath binding her elbows touched the back of her hair.

Then he took the ends of the ropes attached to her ankles in one hand and pulled her knees up into a bend. He hooked his other hand around the Vas'lath on her wrists and pulled her arms back.

He kneeled beside her, drawing his hands together to mold her body.

Her hips lifted from the floor and her chest rose back and she stretched, and stretched.

She gasped.

“Release,” he instructed, sharply.

“C-can't,” she panted.

“Release,” he said again, and she did, gulped breaths slowing, adopting the pacing he'd seen her use before. The muscles of her back visibly softened.

He kept the backbend at that tension, then tested further with another pull. Her breath was even; she did not cry out.

He let out the tension gradually until her legs lay flat on the ground and her arms rested once more over her head.

“Again.”

She did not fight this time, but complied, her body bending to meet under his guidance. Her bound hands reached her ankles. She held her feet in her grasp, slightly awkward with the Vas'lath. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. She held, one, two, three breaths. As she exhaled he guided her back out of the pose again.

Then, timed with her breathing, he moved her body back into the bend. She held her feet once more. He murmured appreciatively.

“Good.”

The fourth time she did not need his assistance. He was free to check that the bend did not cause any unexpected tensions in the Vas'lath. Then he instructed her to release.

And when she was again prone, her breathing even, waiting patiently for his next instruction, he indulged his desire to touch her.

He stroked his hand up her thigh to pet the curve of her ass. He lifted one leg at a time and pressed his lips to the backs of her knees. The sound she made was confused; he couldn't help but chuckle, snorting quietly. The hairs along her body raised in chill response.

Strange? Unexpected. But nice.

He touched his fingers across the muscles of her back. He kneaded, lightly, where she was exposed by the Vas'lath. He made her shudder - not, this time, in dissent, but in pleasure.

His hand ventured lower.

He *shouldn't*.

She thrust her ass up, whispered only, “Yes,” and the tremor in her voice sang through his heart and down his gut and lower. He felt his cock, lying soft on his balls, lurch up full and throbbing to an obscene, pressing bulge in his breeches.

He flushed. Swallowed.

He dipped his hand between her legs.

He shifted the rope. Picked aside the hammock of her smalls.

Slid one finger into the wet, slippery heat of her cunt.

And it was dripping, hot as he'd imagined. He added a second finger, twisted his wrist and caressed against her.

“What's this, ma vhenan?”

And he meant to add something coy, something like, “So soon, again?” or “Already?” but she lurched back and plunged his touch deeper within her and all he could hiss was, “*Fenedhis*,” as she groaned and his vision fogged with the wild head of sex.

She tensed. Struggling to surface, he read that she meant to lunge back again. So he slapped his free hand down on her back, forbidding. And, to her credit, she stopped with an obvious, erotic effort.



*Good.*

... Not just her discipline.

He bit the inside of his cheek, closed his eyes. Stroked the creamy purse of her lips, her entrance. The walls where his cock could nestle could pound could release. His hands were large; his artist's fingers nimble. He felt her clench.

He kissed her lower back and ventured a third finger, unable to repress a smirk when she moaned. He kissed lower, each supple rise of her ass between the ropes, gesturing within her in ways that made the small sweet sounds continue to flute from her throat, that filled the night with the depraved slush and slither sounds of the wet soaking her thighs.

His voice was huskier than he intended, revealing more of his own lust than he would have liked, when he said, "You want me to fill you."

"Yes," she said, "yes."

He fought for control then.

His fingers twisted. Signed a glyph quickly against the inside of her cunt. He infused it with dormant energy, gave her one last deep thrust, and slipped his fingers out. She breathed out. He lapped the taste of her from his fingers, then hooked his fingers into her mouth and enjoyed her muffled performance of cleaning his hand with a cascade of grateful moans.

Then he stood. Walked behind her. Bent and took the ropes attached to her ankles in hand, enough slack in both lines so that her legs stayed resting on the ground as he straightened. He reached overhead and looped the two ropes up over the ridge pole of the tent. He tied two very simple lift knots.

He spread the ropes apart from one another on the pole, wide.

# Suspend

## Chapter Notes

Solas like: \*breathes\* ok AU where Lavellan is ancient elvhen, #everyoneishappy, fluffpiece..... \*whispers\* lllllight smut...

It would be no true *Vas'lath*.

First, she would not be displayed. Solas would have chosen to rig her before an east-facing window, panes of colored glass propped open so that the valley fog wisping up her legs in the morning would be lit by dawn sun.

Little sighs from the spirits of Yearning drawn to her desires as the years passed would fill the - *library*, yes, Solas thought, circling around and kneeling before her. He observed her beautiful body, flat in the dirt and her bindings already dark with sweat. In his mind he transported her to another world.

Heavy dark wood shelves. The scent of ink and the sound of warm water running beneath the tiles depicting, in mosaic, the stories she loved best. He guided her elbows back down over her head, adjusting so that her arms were once more bound under her chest. As his hands passed under her lips Pangara pressed kisses to his knuckles, reverent. He allowed her. Cupped both palms beneath her chin to accept her gentle mouth pressed against his staff-worn fingers. The way the lantern light caressed her: prone - shadows divoting her smooth skin - the way the ropes hung loose from the ridge pole of the tent and wrapped around her ankles - how the ropes flickered in the golden pall, half in shadow, half in light...

He would have built a library for her. Would have braided the beams. Would have labored the structure from his own workings, soil raining on his brow as he lifted the stones and crushed them into place. *Safe, safe among clouds*. Solas remembered finding a meditative song in the hold and sweat of his muscles in the early days of raising places of respite for the fleeing and frightened. Part of him ached for the definitive presence of such work now; though he loved his paints, even as he stroked two pigments together he often found the muddle of dreams caressing his ear when he had been certain, a moment before, that he was waking. Like falling asleep in the middle of a written word and in dreams convinced one's eyes still tracked the page. There were no such tricks for a man laboring to raise walls instead of decorating them.

And there would be no harbour, in the sweat of such work, for the visions that troubled him.

Well. Tonight's labor would serve a similar scheme.

He dipped his grasp to encircle her neck. Squeezed, with profound gentleness.

When she moaned, he felt her throat vibrate beneath his touch.

He felt his eyelids fall, heavy. Closed his hands around her throat, tighter. Pressed. Caressed the callouses of his palms against her soft, naked skin. Held her: at first like a brace, a support.

And then like a trap.

She leaned into his touch. He eased off. She moved more of her weight against his palms, looking to be cut off, and he softened further. Her ears twitched and her nose crinkled, little ways she squirmed that were inelegant and... and sweet. Affection branched within him like roots wrapping around stones in soil. He could have been watching her trying to barter for blank runes in Val Royeaux. The same tells of her exasperation, of her impatience. How thoroughly, he wondered, had he learned these patterns of her spirit in casting beside her in battle? In standing apart as she dug through old lockboxes? In watching her sincerity and humor play when they spoke together, sparred together, before nights spent apart?

And how deeply, he wondered, had he denied to himself that this familiarity grew?

Dark smoke spoiled the air; the oil in the lantern was low.

"I am here," he said, distracted, as he released her neck and walked away to find the small jar among her things. Pangara acknowledged him with a murmur. He filled the lantern carefully, and his eyes were drawn back to her. To the impossibility of what she was allowing him to do. The sweetness of it, the fascinating, shocking arousal of how she let him arrange her. But she did not know how it could have been - given more time, given another path - would never know the patterns of worship that would have been her due, how it would have been his joy to present her in another time.

He would have worked through cool nights and rested by day until the structure was solid, the shelves still bare but art adorning every wall. And music, too, yes, like rain in a rotunda garden; but in most candlelit corners only the weight and calm of silence. Quiet to soothe her nerves. The furs and hot breaths of wolves to soften her troubled spirit. And the library would be acclaimed among the People, who would know the meaning of this task and would murmur among themselves at finding Pride thus inspired. Who would she be, they would have wondered, to have turned his mind from the Fade?

He dipped the burner back into the pool, set the chimney back over the flame and released the lantern carefully so that the light would not swing.

And then she would have travelled beside him.

Solas moved to where the implements were arranged on the ground.

He picked up the crop.

She would have heard the poets in the sky and in the rivers and she would have chosen each of the tomes for her library by hand. And he would have knelt beside her for a moonturn each night, recited stanzas of the *Tarenuth*, the *Renan'revas*, and the *Samahl Sulahna*. Whatever she wished to hear. As the music of his recitation drew from her lovely throat laughter, tears, and moans in turn, her eyes would glow and the wolves at her feet would pant pale moonlit clouds into the icy nights.

They would find each other in the Fade and explore its paths beside their kin. He would rig her wandering form among wondrous memories. Battles. Great orations. The impressions of the Fade twisting about them as curious spirits observed their pastime - and as new spirits were born, bright and pure and laughing, of this love they carried into dreams.

And elvhen and spirits passing their spire would honor her devotion and rejoice, he decided. He switched the flat square of the crop against the flat of his palm. Again, harder, and a thin whistle shivered the air. Would rejoice for both the giver of sensation and its receiver, for the beauty of their devotion and the purity of their love.

Solas took the knife off of his hip and unwrapped his belt. He tugged his shirt over his head and pulled his undershirt up and off likewise, then dropped the bundle on her bedding. The air was not cold against his skin; he credited anticipation. He replaced the sheath, after a moment of indecision, in the waistband of his breeches so that the knife was at his side. Then he flicked the crop, testing its balance one last time, against his own bare stomach - careful not to land over an organ - and felt how the sting burned from the angle and pressure he'd used, a small mark appearing, and was satisfied with the implement. *And, after however long*, he let his mind wander to the thought, one night she would enter the purest state of *vas*. And when their dreamings were as one, with she entirely for him and he entirely over her, he would reach out to her in earnest. Their spirits would touch. They would couple. And the library would become a place of purest, exalted passions for centuries of rapture.

Of course, there would have to be no war.

No madness.

No insurrection.

No Fen'Harel.

And this was not Arlathan.

And this would be no true *Vas'lath*.

Solas stalked to where the ropes were laid and gathered both in hand. He drew the tension so that her ankles cleared the floor. Then he flexed and applied his strength and in one smooth pull her body bent and her weight shifted and her spine arched and her legs inverted.

She did not have years to waste on pleasures. He had stolen those; he had made her fleeting. And any world of ageless passions? He had destroyed it with the Veil.

Pangara was exposed to him in a posture of half-suspension from the ridge pole of the tent. Her back bent as around the curve of an invisible wheel. Her legs were spread wide. He caressed her dirt-coated foot. This was safest, he reasoned, not entirely trusting the structure of the tent, however sturdy, with a full suspension in which she could not break her own fall. In this pose her legs would simply fall to the ground if the suspension failed. Her neck, head - these were safe.

And even meriting this consideration, his access to her was... extraordinary.

Her smalls and the rope were both still bunched to one side of her sex. He apprised her of her exposure with a perfunctory nudge at the folds of her cunt. The hard square of the riding crop would be cold.

She made a plea of such helpless filth that he nearly followed it up with the first tight whack right there.

But the feeling of how accessible she was to him - for his use, for his desire - was one he did not yet want to complicate with the tense rule of pain.

He disciplined his wrist to be still.

He only chuckled, instead, grateful for both her pleasure and the artistry of her body.

"I am not often a sculptor, vhenan, but here you are: sublime."

“What would you like to do to me, *Papae*?” She asked. The press of arousal in her voice; what he wanted was to bury his length in the juice of her thighs, in this shine of her slick spread before him.

And from her tone, it seemed she hoped he would do just that.

He tucked the crop into the band of his breeches next to the knife so that he could secure the knots with both hands free. “As I said,” he wrapped the remaining tails in tight spirals up the ropes. He rotated the knots on her ankles medial so that the cuffs suspended her weight from the middle of her balance. “I will deliver the punishment you have convinced yourself is due. Our exercise will conclude when you release the burdens of your grief into my care.”

She was craning her head to look back towards where he stood, though she could not see him with the band covering her eyes. The muscles of her back torqued in the net of the Vas’lath. He knelt down and and tapped her head, brisk.

“Release.”

She complied, letting her head hang.

Her weight was distributed between the lift ropes and her planked forearms. He knelt and worked a hand with clinical detachment between her breasts and down the Crystal Grace-like binding on her arms, testing for pinching in the lines. Her balance was solid.

“Solas...” she ventured, then grew quiet. After a moment of hesitation, she continued, her voice muffled as she spoke towards the dirt, “I am not convinced that my... that my concerns are something that I need to let go. To release.”

“Oh?” He tugged one the knots sideways, away from a nerve in her shoulder. “Your concerns regard your worthiness to lead. They harm you, and, by extension, the Inquisition.”

She shook her head and he heard the resistance in her voice. “The fears you would take, they make me a better leader.”

“Debateable.” He shifted back on his heels and studied her. “Yours is the soundest judgement among the members of the Inquisition. Self-doubt tilts your ear to the manipulations of those who cannot be trusted with the power you wield.”

She stiffened; he noticed and tapped her spine. “That is unfair,” she said, carefully releasing the tension, “to our friends who work very hard to make me look much, much better than I deserve. No - I mean it, please don’t speak of them that way; I know you do not intend for it to sound so incriminating.”

Though he would have liked to press her assumptions on this matter, he only flattened his lips together, brow wrinkling.

“Fine. And yet. Even if some measure of self-doubt is inevitable in the burden of authority, the way your conscience twists to accept responsibility.... it is like a wound upon your spirit, *ma vhenan*.”

Her laugh bit with a cruelty that he knew was not for him. “Then I do not want it to heal,” she said, “Because if it heals... I’ve forgotten. I do not want to forget.”

And beneath her words lay the body of the human girl she had held in her arms in the river a moon past. The girl’s words: “I can’t remember... I can’t remember....” until she had stopped speaking. And his *vhenan* had refused to move or speak for a very long time. Her skin had been very cold

when she left the river. Solas knew, because when Cassandra had looked to him, rueful, he had gone and he had held the leader of the Inquisition in his arms until she leaned back into his embrace. Then she had gone from him. And when the place had been prepared and she had returned, she shook her head at the torch but remained unable to act. So he had guided her hands through the casting until she mustered the will to power the spell. The oak staff she had placed, wordlessly, on the girl's chest caught first; mercifully, the girl's body had burned quickly.

"I want you to be free of this pain," he said, quietly.

"Pain makes me strong."

And then what they both wanted ran like a storm striking from her to him, unrelated to a dead girl in a river, or to a throne in an old stone room, or to whatever broken roads crumbled in her mind; the thing she desired from him now came through her tense and heavy with the heat of sex.

He steadied.

"So be it. But even so - you must relax the muscle for the bone to set. Let me take even a measure of what you endure." He said more gently, "You are not holding these burdens alone."

She was quiet. For a long time.

He almost reached to remove the band from her eyes.

Then she said, "There's *so much*."

"... I know." He felt the center of himself squeeze through the earth and press against the sky on the other side. *Old regrets, older pains*. It is not your fault, he thought, this is not yours to endure. All of this. It is mine. "I love you, whenan. Ar lath ma," he said. *Though it is cruel, though it is foolish*. "Our love can give you the strength to endure your grief."

"I *need* -" she said, and her voice broke and rose with desperation.

"Yes. Yes." This, at least. Let him be this for her. She accorded him the power to, at least, be this.

He stood slowly, piece by piece; ran his hands up her inverted body as he pressed kisses, roughly, all along her skin. Her ass. Her thighs. He stroked his hands around her legs. Kissed the backs of her knees again. Her calves. Her ankles. Her dirty feet; she muffled a rough laugh and tried not to kick out. Her shins. Her knees. He moved from side to side, her legs spread wide and he covered, tasted, rubbed every part that was suspended by the ropes before him. And he returned to the insides of her thighs - rubbed his lips, his cheeks, his nose and forehead and ears against her soft, supple skin. Devoted his touch to raising the flush of her heat. Besieged her skin with caresses, kisses, even lecherous licks and nips - administered gentle, tickling touches that made her shudder.

He pulled back. Her skin was flushed. He took the implement from his waist.

He flicked the crop upon her thigh.

It stung against her skin, fast, bright; she cried out and he clipped her again before the cry was done - he let the crop bite against her flesh in a torrent, a Cloudbreach storm across her legs. Each sting was precise, calculated, and each delivered so steadily upon the last that her cries were quickly turned to frayed screeches and then to gasps as the shock emptied her lungs.

The blows would numb delivered so quickly. Still, he let each sting whistle behind the last. And then he stopped. Halted, entirely. Let the burn run through her. He was breathing hard. She choked

to catch her breath.

She had no way to know when or where he would let the next sting fall. And he withheld, pressed a kiss against her right heel.

Then he let fly the crop smack against her slick mound, and the bruising *whack* pulled a sharp, keening wail from her throat.

He pressed the square next against a small, already-reddened patch of her thigh. Held it there. Did not move.

She sobbed, spit catching in her throat, and a high, sweet whine pulled on the edge of her breaths as she waited.

Waited.

*Flick*, and down - the crop burst upon the skin in that spot with a vicious snap. Her voice rose up in tremors.

“*Good*,” he breathed against her ankle.

“Make me,” she whispered, and he could tell she was bearing her weight down on her arms. His cock pulsed. He wanted her to take him in hand. Wanted to fill her whining mouth. Wanted her spit warm over his length, wanted to thrust hard and deep between her lips. Wanted her choking around him; wanted to watch her goad him to make her full.

Ah. Well. *That is...*

*Indelicate?* his mind supplied.

Well. Yes. And yet.

He kissed her heel again. Placed the end of the crop on the exposed flesh of the sole of her foot. Tapped very lightly. Then again, again. He increased the speed and power of the pats and then, when she was whimpering, he flicked down a sharp, ringing crack that made her whole body lurch.

“Vhenan,” he murmured, and gave the sole of her other foot the same treatment. “You are good.”

“No. No.” Her head shook from side to side. “No.”

“Yes.” He beat a rhythm of tight, side-to-side whacks increasing in strength along the insides of her spread thighs. The fine red welts blossomed on her skin. “You take the punishment so prettily. So well. Say it.”

“*No.*”

“Pity,” he said, and repeated the flogging, more gently this time, along her inner thighs. He wanted to taste again the moonwater juicing from her cunt. She began to shudder in a particular way - her moans adopting a pitch and tempo that he recognized, now. He maneuvered his free hand around the bulge tenting his breeches, adjusting his cock up and under the band against his stomach again - a more comfortable restraint.

“Since I have been made to ask a second time, there will be consequences.” He pressed the square end of the crop into the wet bush around her cunt. Spread her folds from side to side. He let himself study her swollen sex, and a sort of clinical fascination crept into his tone. “But they may be

delivered with mercy, if you relent now. Say that you are good, ma vhenan. Let me hear that you know you have paid for your mistakes, in full, and tell me that you release your pain to me. To my care.”

She did not answer. In the sudden hush between them, he let the crop slip away and stood to one side. He observed what he could see of her face. Her lips were folded between her teeth. Snot dribbled from her nose onto her upper lip. Then she shook her head, again. A lurching, half-wild shake.

“No.”

And then she became still like a preyed-upon thing. Solas pressed a wrist to his forehead. Deliberated. Wiped the sweat beaded on his brow.

“Consequences, then.”

He widened his stance and twisted the wrist of his free hand. With a fan of his fingers he drummed a burst of bright energy from his palm that manipulated the energies of the Fade dormant in the glyph he’d placed within her sex.

Slowly, he called a cylinder of ice into being within her. He controlled the shape of the spell into a smooth curved rod that slicked, lengthened, mushroom-capped as she moaned and gasped and coughed, “*C-Cold.*”

He slid the ice baton halfway out of her cunt with a twitch of his fingers.

“Not so cold as the ice called forth before, vhenan. It will not injure you. But, yes.” He gestured his hand down and the baton slid back into her cleft, growing to stretch within her, a stiff tongue of ice wrapping up and burrowing in her cleft and over her clit. “Ice is very cold.”

She gasped and moaned and resisted it, at first, her whole body shuddering against the penetration. He touched her foot with the crop.

“Do you call - ?”

“*No*,” she said, forcefully, and collected her will. She bent her body to her purpose - he watched with admiration and hot depravity as she reached out for the strength to accept the chill bulk of the baton.

When she had relaxed just enough that he was confident in her forbearance, he gestured with great finesse. The rod pressed back into her cunt.

She hissed.

“Release,” he instructed, and gestured for the ice to slide half-out of her cleft.

“No.”

He brought the crop down on her right thigh in tandem with the next plunge of the ice between her legs. She cried out.

“Release,” he said again.

She managed only to gasp, and so he repeated the hit, the thrust, the cold tongue rubbing over her clit, the command.



It may not injure her, yet still the chill would be almost unbearable.

And he thickened the smooth sculpture curving out of her cunt. Stretched her sex wider and wider, until she beat her forehead softly against the ground and shook and moaned.

Thrust-

*Thwack.*

He swirled his hand and spiralled a smooth ridge around the length of the ice. The prominent scroll lent a squelching resistance to each slip of the broad baton deeper into her cunt.

Thrust-

*Thwack.*

She continued to deny him and he brought the crop down with increasing variation of strength and location, surged the curved rod in and out of her faster until the cold pounding of her sex was timed inextricably with the rapid whacks of the crop upon her flesh.

She moaned, she screamed, she said only, again and again, first stubbornly, and then like a plea, "No, no, *no*..."

His body responded, muscles straining, wits attuned to the puzzle of her, of how much she could take, of where and when to lay the crop. His only vocation was her need, clear and certain: to be taken apart and reassembled, to be reconciled to herself. Her sobs, her gasps, her refusals - these were his tools as much as the crop and ice. He shoved the ice deep within her and fattened it with the flick of his finger. She cried out from the cold and the sensation of being so abruptly, brutally *filled* just as he snapped the crop upon her skin. Her cunt stretched wider around the penetration, until the width of the ice pressing into the river of her was vast, a staff more massive than could possibly be comfortable, yet still plunging half-out and then deep within her again and again while she moaned. She was entirely *his* in the bondage. Her legs shook in the cuffs suspending her ankles from the ceiling. Her body strained in the ropes. She could not escape from this wild kindling torture, and he thrilled at how, even so, she could not help but try. He orchestrated for her pain and pleasure to shudder together, violently, until at last her defiant "*No*"s turned to wordless "*oh, oh, oh*"s, then to pleas of "*Sorry - I'm sorry - I'm sorry - Solas - please... I'm so sorry, please, please, please, no more...*"

And so he paused.

She was still.

And then she nodded. Started to shake.

He was not expecting the difference to be so stunning. But as she submitted the burden of her grief to him, her cunt straining wide and tight around the glistening blue baton curving into the air, her legs gardenized with pink blossoms, she shuddered and, at once, the effect of her whole being was made more compact. It was as if her essence focused, contracted. She became more concentrated in her own body.

She sobbed.

"I am doing the best I can. It is good. Good. I am... not - not worthless. I cannot - I can't... I'm sorry... I release. Take it. H-help me."

Sweat trickled into his eyes, streaked down his chest. He breathed heavily. Still, he tested the honesty of her surrender.

“You are worthy of praise, Inquisitor. A fine and worthy leader.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?” He said, gently.

“I am good.”

Yes. Though she shook, she was affirmed. Piked through with the cold daggers of pain and provocation, she was at peace.

“It is done,” he said. “Well done, ma vhenan.” He reached for the baton and, slowly, pulled it from her body. She gasped, nearly orgasmed then from the stimulation of the withdrawal, but he watched as she fought to control her release and succeeded. He let the baton melt in his hand and the water rushed to the ground. Lingering trails of her arousal hung loose from her cleft.

“... Is this abandoning them?” She asked, through panting tears. He started to loosen the lift knots near her ankles, carefully, ready to hold her close to him. Ready to kiss her brow and rub her wrists and feed her the small sweets he’d secreted into the bottom of her pack.

“No. I will carry them for a time. I will help you endure. This is the way that such burdens were shared in... among ancient kings, generals. Vhenan, you may walk free.”

And then many things happened at once.

The Anchor flared into a green explosion of light and twisted her body. Her whole being convulsed in the restraints.

Solas felt his spirit leave his body, as if he were not waking. He dreamed that he stepped wholly through the Fade, though his body did not move.

After only a moment, he became aware that his mind had returned to his flesh.

And then Pangara screamed out, *had been* screaming out - and his heart clenched. He felt his whole body go cold. Numb. He heard, but he could not move. He could not act.

*No.*

Not now.

It was terrible, the way she cried and writhed with gruesome fear twisting in her voice as she yelled, panicked: “F-Fen’*Harel!*”

## Sink

She shuddered. Her whole body warped. Sound, green light, crackling. Shrill, she cried out, “Fen’Harel!”

He *froze*.

He had shifted his feet as he stood beside her on the snowy path to the Rift. Hands fiddling nervously, he had hunched forward in an attempt to look smaller, to appear non-threatening and cooperative. He had been nervous that the Anchor would somehow give him away, that the mark would somehow communicate with her. Whisper his identity into her ear, perhaps? Suggest that she fear him? He had not been expecting to see her, to meet her for the first time on that day, and so his mind had been partially fogged with leaf; he’d retreated to the Fade regularly after the explosion, looking for answers and trying to settle the loathing in his gut - to ease how his detestable sloppiness, his blindness to Corypheus’ full intentions, had put yet more distance between himself and the Orb. And then no recriminations had been flung his way. And when Pangara had not known him, had not challenged him, he had been left feeling only loose and giddy and grateful and keen, so keen, to know and shape this vessel of his power.

And then she had changed everything.

And now she convulsed and spat this name.

He nearly fled.

*Run. Upriver. Into the night, the hills, the caws and howls and cold winds in the dark.*

In pieces, through his terror, a memory of language, speech, and meaning fought for purchase.

Understanding tapped at his consciousness even as he jerked a halting half-step back.

The memory of her saying, through another flash of heat, panic:

*“I will speak the dawnstar.”*

In the way her head whipped and sought wildly; in how she wriggled in the ropes towards where she thought he stood; in how she choked, “F-Fen’H-Harel!” again, more urgently this time: these were the cues by which Solas, finally, inferred that the dawnstar had been named anew.

*Vhenan.*

He was at her in seconds. First pulling at the knots, even teeth trying to unravel her; then he recalled himself, scooped the knife from his hip and sliced the lift ropes cleanly. He supported her legs, careful not to rub or press against the places where her skin was raised and pink. She kicked. He guided her out of the backbend and lowered her to the ground.

She convulsed again on her belly, trying to push her bound arms and the bright Anchor away, stifling a cry, and he was so afraid. But his movements were quick, careful, and confident as he sheared through the restraints of her harness. The ropes dropped from her. He pushed them off of her skin: gentle, firm. He unfolded her arms.

“I’m here,” he murmured, “I’m here, still here, here, *ma vhenan*.” She was strangely quiet, stiff. He remembered that she would have endured in silence the long-ago marking of her vallaslin.

Normally so pliable, now she became as he saw her before a kill: glacial. She might cry freely in the tortured ecstasy of pleasure, but would not, or could not, cry from this pain. He eased her body around so that she was curled on her side on the ground, then he sat and placed her head on his lap.

Another green blast from the Anchor. The start of a whimper that she silenced. Solas lifted her palm. He folded his hands over the Anchor. He closed his eyes, breathing in, breathing out, reaching into the power there and murmuring into the chaos of the mark blossoming through the realms.

It fought him. As it had in Haven, the mark would not recognize him. He saw the threads binding the magic to her flesh and he knew he could not claim it. And yet, he could beseech it. Supplication. The old bonds still present, if weak. He prayed words of balm and weaving, of sleep and control, of Veil and mystery and patience, speaking in ancient mantras. He revisited the patterns that, he presumed, had worked to save her life before.

The Anchor answered: a cacophony of worlds ebbing into silence.

She trembled and went limp, teeth clenched tight.

He tugged loose the knot of the band. Even the gentle light of the lantern would be a shock after so long in the dark, so he placed his hand over her gaze as the band dropped. He felt her eyelashes brush and flutter against his fingers. After a moment, he peered in between them, and her eyes gleamed - blown wide still, enrapturing like a fall of moon on snow. His remorse bullied through his heart, threatened to push from him every secret, every confession. He attempted, vainly, to mount some defense, failing, mind racing to set the words, the logic of his life in some configuration that would convince her to forgive him. No, not *convince* - she could pass her judgement on him freely, as she would, but only if he could make her *understand* - and then she coughed. He smoothed a touch along her shoulder.

She raised her left hand and turned it, studying the green aura canyoned through her flesh. Her eyes were swollen as she squinted at where the lines of her palm were puckered around the beguiling, twisting Fade-light rippling from under her skin. She swallowed, coughed again, flexed her hand, and then closed her eyes and took many deep, shaky breaths.

He was only silent, and ashamed.

Then she opened her eyes. Blinked up at him.

“You... your shirt is off,” she said.

“Oh - ? Ah, yes.” He looked down at his own partial nudity, feeling a ridiculous turn of embarrassment. He added, by way of explanation, “The exertion. Sweating; it was more practical.”

It was a relief to see her smile, if weakly.

“*Uh huh*. Practical...”

He bridled. “It was.”

“No, no, I’m sure it was. I can see it was. No really, yes. Lots of sweat.”

He felt his body curl, awkwardly self-conscious. Exposed to her.

Guilt. Helplessness. Feelings he could only seek respite from, never to fully abandon the swarms of his mind.

“Just recover, vhenan. Just be calm,” he murmured, eyes sliding away from hers. Shy as when they had first met.

He hesitated to reach out and touch her again. Wondered if to do so would be dangerous, or selfishness beyond measure. But he disciplined the notion: he had a responsibility to her in this quiet press of night. He carefully touched her shoulders. Rubbed all along her arms, stomach, and back with the aim of easing blood back under her skin. The indents of the rope laddered from her wrists to elbows, mottling her chest and breasts, her stomach, her back. He checked carefully along her joints for sounds of rattling, crackling - listened for catches in her breath. She was still, her face turned up to his. He lifted her slowly, supporting her head, and cradled her up to his chest so he could study her closely. His hands moved along her hips and legs, gentle in case she could not speak of a pain. He felt a wash of relief when there were no swollen breaks, no unnatural twists, no marks besides those he had bestowed himself.

She began, once again, to shake. He met her eyes, nodded. “Good,” he murmured, “Well done my heart, you are so strong.” He tucked his arm beneath her knees and wrapped her close to his chest and lifted her, stood with her in his arms. He carried her to her bedding. He placed her down and folded her legs up, removing the covers from beneath her. He tucked the blanket close, methodical and gentle around her curled limbs. And then he added the pelt, folded the fur up under her chin. He could not help but brush one finger softly along her cheek. She began to rock from side to side. He saw fresh tears webbing her eyelashes. He felt a saddened, patient relief - for, if he judged rightly, this, at least, was familiar.

“I am still here, ma vhenan,” he said as he balanced back, leaning to reach and drag the waterskin closer by its strap. He uncapped it and cupped a hand beneath her head, lifting, asking softly, “Sit up, just a little...” She nodded, leaned up, sipped, and then gagged - almost spat.

He pressed his hand to her forehead. “Drink. Good. Feel the heat of your breath when you exhale. Feel the cool air as you breathe in. Warm, cool; notice how the air changes as it enters and exits your body. Warm. Then cool. And warm again. Focus. Yes, your body is in control right now - it will move as it must, you are safe here.”

He waited as she rocked, as she worked through. Praised her, thanked her softly. He whispered things he knew she could not understand and let the patterns of his words fall into her recovery like trickling rain into a well.

After a long time had passed, time he did not count or care, she stilled.

“I am here for you,” he said again.

“The Anchor,” she said, “It flared up. And then it felt like all my bones... pulled apart.” her voice cracked high.

He despised himself. Vicious condemnation.

“I understand. You are safe,” he said, then hedged. Even given the context, this was too close to a lie. “You are safe right now,” he amended, though he knew she would not mark the difference, and, not fully understanding how the mark had not yet killed her, he could only guess and hope that this was so.

Pangara nestled deeper into the blankets. The button of her nose disappeared beneath the pelt.

“I know.” She looked at him, direct. “But what happened?”

Yes. This. He had been tracing the paths in his mind, searching for a deception that would satisfy and reassure.

“Something happened to me when the Anchor lit,” not a lie. “I saw the Fade manifest around me, as if my mind had been pulled into a dream. And when I was released, you had been calling.”

She was nodding, and no part was untrue. “A new ability from the Anchor, do you think?”

“I could not say. You must tell me if such a thing happens to another of our companions.” It would not, he thought. The longer he parsed the details of his experience, the clearer this became: that this was the resonance of some entity from within the Fade preying upon his thoughts. Had it used the massive power of the Anchor to summon his mind to the other realm? This seemed most likely. But use of the Anchor by any being other than the host bearing it should be, theoretically, impossible.

“*Ar lath ma.*”

He snapped his gaze back down to her, lips falling apart.

“*Ir abelas,*” he replied, meaning it more than she could know, and she shook her head.

“No. No, I’d rather not have you feel responsible for how this - *thing* ended it, Solas. I want you to know that - before the Anchor flared up - what you had done for me...” she trailed off, her face a thing he could not read. Then Pangara sat up, the fur falling off her bare, honey-gold shoulders as she closed the pelt over her breasts. She raised her other hand to cup his cheek. She seemed to struggle.

“It was a gift,” is what she settled on, “and it was generous, and it was good, and it was kind. Thank you.” Then she leaned in and kissed the side of his mouth.

And it took him a moment to fully understand the meaning of her words. To hear the way in which she’d spoken.

Her spirit was bare and giving: it told him she could let him go. She could watch him leave and stand apart. This beautiful and gentle night would exist between them only as a memory to sweeten both their dreamings.

She chose this moment, with care, to offer to him something that he could claim: a freedom that, it occurred to him, became *very* clear to him in that moment, would not be so easily offered again. Here, his release. She did not tie him to her with this act. The delicate dance they had shared: their union was not an irrevocable truth, but only, at this moment, a matter of mutual agreement. Of accord and compromise; of *want*. Of desire.

She released him.

To leave her in her bedding now and to allow her to drift into the solitude of dreams. To wake tomorrow morning and to bathe side by side in the river, each shyly avoiding the sight of the others’ body. To travel with her, but to maintain a dignified distance. To fight with her, but to relinquish her. To advise her on this war and on the mind of her enemy, but to observe her pursuing another life and, likely, another love.

Yes, he thought to himself, that is for the best.

And he repeated the thought, firmly, as pain lanced through his heart.

His gut. His hands, opening and closing. A block lumping in his throat.

Yes. That is for the best.

And so *why* did he say, rasping, “*Ar lath ma vhenan; ma vhenan*; I would give you anything. Anything.”

*Coward.*

He struggled to justify the idiot ache of his pounding heart.

To lose her.

To lose her.

He bowed forward, head landing on her shoulder.

*I would give you another world.*

She must have expected him to go. He, until this night, had so often retreated when their intimacy had grown too close. When they had flirted too near the line of restraint that he enforced between them. And now that they had crossed that line, she offered to let him slip back over. She had been prepared to accept his distance. To respect that he might leave her.

But he knew, bitterly vulnerable to this simple thing: she did not want him to go.

It had been so poignant, the yearning in her eyes. She had been resigned that he might flee, perhaps believing him overwhelmed by what had passed between them, or anticipating that with his curiosity satisfied he would be uninterested in further dalliance.

But still she chose him. She wanted him.

She did not want him to go.

And he wanted, desperately, to stay.

*I would give you the truth*, he promised, silent, now certain that his only course was to petition her. ... *Not now, but soon. Soon. Perhaps you, among all of these strange dreams, perhaps you will understand.* She was laughing softly, tracing his shoulders and his back, murmuring, “So grim, always, old dreamer.”

He let his weight rest with her, let her run her fingers along the back of his neck, his head, let her comfort him as he writhed beneath the heel of his deception. He did not deserve her.

Then her tone shifted, and she asked, “Anything?”

He chuckled hoarsely.

“So it would seem.”

And it was on the subsequent flood of shame that his heart deadened in his chest.

The song of love silenced within him. Where before his pulse had raced, his breath caught, his arms ached to hold her, to lift and embrace and pull her to him, now there was no spark of feeling that he could muster. As if the sun, brushing a mountainside, had warmed away the snow and left the rock face bare.

He felt empty. Did not even feel a twisting in his gut, no lump in his throat. Felt nothing.

He struggled, at first, against the sudden void between his ribs. Tried to recapture that brilliant height of infatuation that only moments before - and then, just as suddenly, he stopped. The effort was futile, and he was foolish for trying.

What had so attracted him to her, after all? Why did he torture himself with this endeavor, when no part of him was beholden to her by circumstance or alliance? Having the love of the leader of the Inquisition, the bearer of his mark. This was not a prerequisite for his designs.

As he knelt in her arms, his guilt faded away with his arousal. He felt as if his mind lifted above a fog of madness. He felt nothing towards her. She touched him; he felt numb, even perhaps mildly repelled. Her warmth against his ear was sickening. What they had shared together dimmed from fire to coal in his mind, and his disgust at himself sliced clean.

She was not real.

He, who walked the realm of dream and mind with certain step for ages - he had fallen into easy march with these simulacrum of life. And he had allowed himself to care for this illusion of representation, structured by his interior mind? Why?

Thinking clearly now, he tried to be kind. After all of the ways in which he had failed: to spread the teachings of the Fade, to halt the dread machinations of war, to bring freedom to his people, to protect the spirits of the realm from what the Evanuris would unleash? The helplessness of walking physically in this Blighted world, rife with death and atrocity? His contemporaries here, mere ghostly inhabitants, were severed even further from the Fade than those who had dismissed its teachings in his youth. And that these horrors had been imposed by *his* lack of foresight, his lack of understanding and wisdom as to the consequences of his actions. Imposed by his loyalty and grief, by his pride. Mortality: the way no one remained to *remember* had destroyed aeons of history more thoroughly than any totalitarian state. He had desired revolution, and he had wrought chaos.

He suddenly remembered this emptiness. From time before. From when he had clutched his eyes and, howling, at the edges of the world, he had... his mind veered. A blank time. Sealed deep, carefully, within his wanderings.

But he remembered other things. He had never been able to turn aside the memory of the first. The stirring against the Veil. He had gone to meet the spirit in the Fade, expecting a Long Sleeper. And their appearance: so rotten, each limb degraded, skin withered. He did not understand, then. And the spirit did not stay, could not walk beside him. Could not see the wonders of the paths. It went from him and he learned, after seeking Wisdom, after watching Grief born again and again and again, what he had done.

And then, he'd awoken. And he saw that the elves had been carved hollow by the trick of perception he'd used to manipulate conscious observation of the Fade. Bound to the earth, and he had taken everything from them. Spirits twisted across the barrier, defiled when they touched the World that Wakes. He had made them, all of them, incapable of rational thought; Tranquil. Despicable. And this time there was no gentle embrace to ease the thought from his mind. He walked in all the realms among his victims.

Among these burdens, it reasoned that he would reach out, in weakness, to arms of comfort. This escape. This... distraction. Hadn't he admitted to himself that he wanted this distraction? It had been a salve for his conscience.

A small comfort that had become an excruciating trial.



Now he saw through the illusion, and he was only tired.

He felt no shame now.

He felt nothing, now.

Except her hand rising up the curve of his thigh. Her fingers brushing over his breeches.

He wrenched away from her, repulsed. Stood. Realized the waterskin was still in his hand and was mostly empty. He looked down and saw soft, slow confusion moving in her features, and he said, "I will draw more water from the river." His own words sounded to him redundant. Inane.

She nodded. This thing of soft texture and familiar shape watched him as he left. It tucked down beneath the covers with a hitch in her breath. He looked back at her and tried again to feel as if this were not a terrible trick, and yet he knew that, no. This clarity he felt now, drained of desire: this was the truth of this world. It had no inherent shape, and though his mind perceived the phenomena of her, nothing could prove her true. He felt a terrible weightlessness. He turned away. He saw the knife on the ground and picked it up and replaced it in the sheath in his breeches. His limbs felt heavy as he moved them. He opened the flap of the tent.

The ash left in the firepit still scented the area of their camp with a smoky tang. An occasional pop and fizzle remembered the heat of the coals. They were alone in this wilderness. He was alone, again, under another night sky. Stalks of the plant that this world, to his vague amusement, called *elfroot* swayed in a tumbling, momentary breeze. The plant was plentiful around the camp. As was the blood lotus growing from the shore, stalks tugging gently downstream. He passed by his own tent and walked to the slow-moving river. The light from the moons crystallized on the water. He looked up and promised, "Soon." While there were only these two tents remaining, the trodden ground still showed evidence of a much larger force.

The Inquisition struggled to deliver relief to the homesteads in this area of the Plains. The Inquisitor had sent the party of mixed scouts and mercenaries from this camp that morning, escorting three wagons loaded with supplies. She had considered the maps and had traced the branching routes that the supplies should travel, arranging journeys for tactical advantage in the landscape and sightlines to be afforded to the mercenaries. The forces were to guard the wagons against the bandits active in the hills. He guessed that one of the scouts under Leliana's orders still watched their position.

This stop had been their last, the third of such visits where her expertise in this sort of travel had been deemed invaluable. Tomorrow, or potentially the day after, they would close a rift rumored somewhere to the northeast. A stabilizer near the falls northwest would help smooth the Veil. Both destinations were an easy journey from this camp.

It was a dream all too convincing.

A shadow-play of life. A world too hollow. Solas looked to the sky, splattered with the moonspray of stars. The Fade must be restored. Once he had the unlocked Orb, he could raise his people, clear a path for vengeance to the mad soldiers, and erase the relics of his mistakes from this and all realms. And then...? And then. It would be easy to turn his mind again to the Fade.

What creature stalked his steps?

He dipped the waterskin in the river and let it grow heavy. He mused on a set of vast memories, trying to parse some hint of the thing at his heels. Perhaps if he looked within the Fade. Three spirits that might aid him came to mind. He capped the waterskin and, after choosing among them,

bent to one of the nearby bitter varieties and grasped the stalk close to the soil. He tugged the whole plant up with a heavy rip as the bulbous rhizome and tendrily spill of roots came loose from the sandy ground.

He was holding plant, packet, and pipe and was coming back out of his tent when he heard her.

“Solas?”

He looked over, distracted. She’d thrown the fur over her shoulders and still wore her smalls, but otherwise she was bare like a wild thing in the opening of her tent.

He felt a stirring in the back of his mind.

But he could not be moved.

She studied the contents of his hands.

“Want company?” She asked, tilting up her chin.

No harm in indulging her.

“Certainly. Join me.” He nodded towards the river. She gave him a queer look, but left the opening of the tent and followed him to the water. It was a slow beast, this old river, and their camp was made on a curve of the shore amenable to bathing. He sat, dipping his feet into the water. He filled the pipe and tucked the leaf to a pillow in the bowl. Then he took the knife, shaved a flake from the rhizome, and squeezed the ropy flesh until the oils of the root beaded to the surface.

She watched and sat beside him. She leaned on her elbows. “You really haven’t spent much time among the clans.”

“Hm.” He swiped his finger over the oil, dabbed the substance onto his tongue, then passed the root to her. She mimicked him, sucking the dew from one finger, face twisting at the bitter, aromatic shock of the taste so undiluted. He lit the pipe with a shuddery flick of mana.

He pulled the clouds of dream into his lungs and, holding the heat of the smoke within, offered the pipe out in trade. At first she only took the pipe, so that he had to gesture, irritably, until she placed the root back in his hand. He exhaled. Brought the fiery oil to his tongue again. She puffed lightly next to him, raising fire twice, then three times, holding the sky within her deeply each time, either not judging the strength of this leaf or not concerned about its potency. And then she offered the pipe back to him and he took it, but when she kept her palm outstretched, waiting for the root, he crooked a grin her way. “I think not.” Her nose crinkled but she half-smiled and stood, wading out into the river.

Solas settled back on his elbows. He finished the pipe at leisure, his gaze drawn to the moons clear in that vast array of constellations simmering on the surface of the waters above.

The Dalish named him on their horizon. Named a star that lingered into each rising day, “Dread Wolf?”

The Dalish used this curse in lovemaking?

This was a curiosity he played over. At first a notion settled within his mind which was not terribly unflattering, at that. But then, perhaps, more likely, it was just another way in which the legends of the Wolf twisted. An alarm... a call all could recognize as something gone awry, a warning that danger was present. But did they not have some superstition that it would draw his attention to

Speak his name? Yes, and this was a notion he had become increasingly uncomfortable with, of late.

He could ask her. But how? What could he say that would not seem suspicious, trying to discover by what preposterous myth the dawnstar had become his namesake? And, if she did not mind elaborating, exactly when in the last ten centuries might her people have developed this association? He snorted. No, he could not ask her. Too revealing of an ignorance that was more than peculiar - it would seem unnatural, especially since he had agreed upon the term at the start. But he had assumed too much. And she, just as likely, would not know the answer.

He looked up at the sky. The edges of the Fade bled through his altered mind. And then, without realizing, he was looking at her.

This vision turned the water's course, her form moon-inked and half-immersed. But as she turned, her skin showed its beauty: the cobbled paths on which the rope had laid its teeth and so traversed the hazy sweetness of her strength and glory.

And she bent low, her body dripping. And she had no care for him.

She cupped cool water to her thighs, hummed a half-familiar song as water soothed the fires that would linger.

He sat and watched her bathing there. The tangle of his soul pulled taut; he heard from his own throat a sound of anguish.

She looked to him.

He turned away. He tried to remember loving her.

But he wanted no more haunted dreams. He felt no guilt, no shame, and this was such relief. But as his soul had excised the effect, so it had removed the cause. And this proved, suddenly, a fresh agony. *What had gone wrong? What was missing?* The root touched through his thoughts and found there only torpor.

He heard the cross of water against her thighs, her shins, her ankles, sounds so much louder than they should be, and he thought he heard the pebbles under her feet all scraping, shifting. He could not show her this, how far he had retreated after promising so much, his shame redoubled, his spirit so far away.

She placed her hand atop his head, touched her fingers to his ear. Said, softly, "Are you here? Are you with me?"

And he looked up at her, and wondered. And felt so certain that she could not bring the world around him into focus. That there was no return from these depths - there could be no return; he had no pain here; she was not real. He had indulged this fantasy long enough.

But something... haltingly, he shook his head. And he found himself saying, "I can't be sure. But I'm... reasonably certain." Even to his own ears, his voice sounded brittle.

She looked sad, then, and said, "Oh, come back, Solas, come back. I am so sorry. I did not see what you needed before. But I see it now. Come back to me from wherever you've fled." She lifted his hand so that it rested over her heart. "Please. Trust me. Listen. You are not alone."

And for the first time in what felt like an age, as if the person who had held her close and promised her anything had been another man, Solas felt his heart: an avalanche of painful beats; an echo of

her pulse.

And he remembered, keenly, how lonely staying in this distant place would be.

He experienced a rush of exhaustion so violent, his hands trembled and he fumbled the pipe.

Pangara snatched out and caught it before it hit the ground, and she was already wrapping her arms around him and pulling him to her chest. She was on her knees in the water. He felt as if his body were carved of stone in her arms. He could not move. He leaned against her only as much as she held him to her, and he could do no more.

She guided his head to lay against her breast. He saw her pulse jumping in the smoothness near her collarbone. Felt the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. Slowly, with a rush beneath his skin, he felt able to move his fingers. The muscles in his arms clenched and then released. He did not know where the question came from, but it became an urgent, racing thought in his mind.

“Did I hurt you?”

Which even through the cloud of root seemed a spectacularly foolish question, given the circumstances of their evening. But she replied immediately, entirely without hesitation, “It was a gift. It was a gift. Thank you.”

He had seen slaves beaten.

He had...

He groaned, finally reached around her, and pressed his face closer to her skin. He shook his head against her body, eyes pressing shut. “I enjoyed dominating you,” he whispered.

“Good,” she said.

“Controlling you.”

“Yes,” she smoothed her hands, sure, strong strokes, along his aching shoulders. He realized that the pain was from more than the effort of delivering her punishment. His mana was depleted from the spellwork. And he had been carrying guilt tightly across his back, only finding relief in the Fade - in the absence of his flesh. She found those hurts, somehow, within his muscles, and pressed just so the slope of his neck. Collected the pain and eased it from his body.

“The subjugation of another is loathsome. It is a violation,” he said, thinking back to how he had sought for her. He had reached for her in the very moment she released him. Inexplicable. “I should not be allowed to manipulate you.”

“Hm. You think that’s what you were doing?” She lifted his chin, placed a kiss soft on the tip of his nose.

He only swayed his head aside. Even this clinging to her felt like a pantomime of emotion. He pressed his ear against her chest to listen to the thrum of her heartbeat. He could not get close enough. “When you called. When you said - . When the Anchor -,” he switched to only, “you were in agony.” *You bear that mark because of me.* “I - it was careless. I failed to - to act -”

“Shhh,” she rocked him, forward and back. “You did what you could in a moment that was strange. Unprecedented. I know that,” he felt her hold up the palm bearing the mark, “I know that I am not easy to love.”

He sat up, then, and cupped her face in both hands, and met her eyes, and said, very slowly.  
“Nothing. Nothing is further from the truth.”

Then he pressed his lips to hers - or tried, missing and brushing her chin instead. And then he *felt*: love, idiotic, mad, returning to him in the heat of every corner of his mind and body. And he kissed her, and she kissed him with the honeyed press that so dismantled him. The distance between his spirit and this world closed across the bridge of her. The whole of his feeling broke open within him, and he felt the distant loathing wrought from his misjudgements diminishing, the dangerous arc of his dissociation hurtling back to earth as she held him, wanting, to her.

It was not comforting, to be reassured of her reality.

But he would walk this path more man than monster, if he could carry her heart beside his own. And with that bright, small comfort trembling through him, he gasped against her.

Kissed her harder.

He turned her in his arms and lowered her to the ground beneath him. He pressed over her. His hands dug in the sand and soil and rocks under the fur that pooled off her shoulders. He covered her body with his, mouth hot on her lips. His body pulsed with the memory of its exertions, but the exhaustion melted from him. What was left was a jittering vibration of warmth and wanting flickering through his whole being, flaring every time their tongues touched, building as she sucked his lower lip, as he groaned with the *goodness* of this, of her. Water splashed over their legs.

The space under his lips seemed to vibrate. He kissed down her chin, to her neck, tongue darting out to taste her, touching upon the bruise he'd suckled there before; she panted, and he rose up to take her mouth again with his, the two mirrors of moonlight shining from her eyes. He pressed his hands all along the sides of her body, dragging swaths of muddy sand along her skin where he held her, caressed her, broke away to kiss, messily, first at her shoulder, then at her side, then, finally, her bare breast. His cock bulged with impropriety eagerness against the rub of her thigh as her breast trembled in his wide hand; he savored her bareness as exquisite even as he humped, obscene, against her; he flicked his tongue to the sweat of her darkened crests and left a trail of defiling saliva between where he palmed her breasts. Then he enveloped her right nipple whole, hearing her hiss, “*Yes;*” sucked it deep within his mouth and listened to the song of her tormented arousal. He luted his tongue in lazy, orchestrating patterns - discovering what flicks, rough suckles, and gentle licks drew what noises from between her teeth. Hitched an arm under her leg to grind harder against her thigh, perceiving her body flush through a golden thrumming aura in the world around them: her aura was like a luminous curve, his own aura rotating as ambient energy drew to them, sensation growing bright as his mind shifted to perceive more of the energies of the Fade. He heard her hands scramble against the rocks and then fly up against his chest.

She pushed him so hard that he broke away, hands dropping to her hips. It coursed through him, too, when her whole body shuddered with a shocked gasp of, “That is - an *unholy* - *what* -?”

And he pressed his eyes together, fought to make coherent thoughts, and enunciated very intentionally, “The consumption of the bitter oil, pure, while you may heat it in cooking, is intended to enhance effect of the - ah - leaf. It has fallen out of practice, I am aware. And... I had forgotten...” He belatedly realized how this, all of this, would sound. She slithered beneath him on another wave of golden delirium.

And she sounded absolutely unconvinced as her hands clenched, her head tilted back, and her pelvis pressed urgently at his, gasping, “*You forgot?*”

And he could not say, ‘one thousand years, vhenan, is a very long time,’ and ‘this particular side effect is only relevant in company, and I am accustomed to being *alone*,’ because his hips were moving against her, and he was groaning, and the libidinous effect of the oil coursing in tandem with the root in their bodies was an intoxication he had no words to fight.

He bolted away from her, the loss of her warmth torture, and stumbled back into the river, one, two steps, then fell to one knee in the shallow water. The water was cool as it soaked his foot wrappings, breeches.

“We will not...” he breathed, slapping water to his face, but she was coming towards him.

Pangara stood slowly. His eyes followed the grace of her, widening: he could not look away. With the moonlight flashing off of her gaze, the way she stalked near - certain, athletic, her curves dirtied where he’d spread his hands upon her - she appeared as a creature otherworldly walking into the river. A woman who could reach up into the sky and lay her hand around the moon.

“Anything, you said. Solas.” She came to stand above him with a crook in the smile of her parted lips. She cocked her chin and studied his face, traced her nails along his jaw, and her eyes were heavy and bright with sex; he looked up to her - outlined, it seemed, by a thousand tracing stars, and he was utterly, utterly vanquished.

Then her posture shifted, and she turned her palms out, and she stepped just slightly side to side, and she presented for him with that turn of intent that told him all she desired.

He swayed, vision blurring, her demand to be moved by him a palpable thing that rose, exalted, within him.

He reached up and yanked her smalls down to her knees.

She exclaimed, surprised, and he shifted forward in the water, heeding only briefly the spiky roll of rocks beneath his knees. He cupped behind her, pulling her to him. He nuzzled his nose up against her slit, eyes closing, rapturous.

She hiccupped, “That’s not what I -” but he lunged his tongue between her wetted thicket, and she swayed and gasped. He held her to keep her from falling as he explored within her already-wet folds, tasting her moonwater like sleek frosting in her sex, bringing his tasting to her hood and nudging this with practiced finesse to reveal her clit. He lipped out, testing that pearl, *wanting this, having this*, and listened for the way her breath moved. And when she sounded desperate for such strokes, he stippled his tongue upon her swelling clit.

And at that, she moaned low and brief. Her hands smoothed over his head. And he became a glutton of her.

She was as quiet as the trees’ reflections swaying black on the surface of the water. Hypnotic, the song of the river whispered between the shores and broke around their legs. He dabbed his tongue then sucked, circling a rhythm until her breath hitched, then he slid his tongue within her cunt, then returned to her clit; he moved between these pleasures at whim. His ears rubbed the insides of her thighs and, occasionally, must have brushed a welt, for she would hiss and whine and squirm. When he angled his head to suck her juices flowing from her cunt his nose buried deep between her folds, and the squelch as she parted dispelled any remnant of his restraint. Had the river cut a new course away from them and the hills crumbled and the night fallen into day and the days fallen into years, he could not have said if the world went on without her.

She was trembling, leaning over him, her hands grasping his shoulders. He supported all her weight

there - her arms buckling once, then again - and he could measure the appreciation of a touch by how her hands clenched his muscle.

“I can’t - when I’m standing -” she breathed, and moved as if she meant to pull away from him.

He tightened his grip and gave her legs a brutal shake.

She had forgotten: she had submitted this to him.

And this challenge pleased him.

She moaned with realization and remained on her feet, obedient, and he had his way with her dewy, honeyed cunt, debauched - he gave into his deepest pleasures of having her syrup upon his lips, his nose, his chin. He smeared her across his cheeks. He sucked and hardened his tongue, shaping and rune-writing obscenities that both repulsed and roused him over her clit, unable to keep from moaning praises, muffled, against her sex.

“*Ma'malfenasha*. Nectar. You are everything. No gift compares. I am indebted to your beauty for reminding me the sun has heat, the rivers swell in spring, and the sea takes its tides from the moon.”

And her hips started to tip up, and he rolled his hips against the confining press of his breeches, unable to keep from rocking as if he humped the curves of her body.

He dipped one hand down into in the river and then raised it first to stroke over her hood as he pressed his tongue to her clit, then to bury his fingers, as he’d enjoyed so much before, to stroke within her cunt. It was as creamy as before, smooth and warm, and all his thoughts of speaking vanished, and all he could do was groan onto her warmth. She fidgeted, whimpering, and he spanked a tight swat to her rear. She rocked forward onto his face. Oh, he *liked* that; he spanked her again, harder - her surge forward rammed his neck back. His face felt hot. His gut clenched and his cock strained. He murmured, helpless, suffocating inside her, and then pulled back for air.

The flow of the river felt, through the root, as if the water climbed up over his legs and arms and body and enveloped her, too, and he felt the moment of synchronicity and colliding magic when she felt it: the aura of water tidal over them both. He pressed a line of kisses up her thigh back to her sweetness, fingers bending, rolling her hood and then dipping below to work her clit. Her breathing grew rapid, little moans and then louder groans woven in her throat, until he was gesturing within her and rolling his tongue upon her and jerking the deep roots of her pearl between his lips, nudging her leg up around and over his right shoulder, tilting back and lifting her. One arm held her under the curve of her backside. Her foot left the water. Her hands dug down on his shoulders, one knee pressed for purchase against his chest, the other draped over his shoulder, and he held her helpless in the air, his mouth sucking rhythmic and urgent as she started to tremor. More, and more, and he tilted her back higher - and he was so deeply satisfied when her body stiffened, and his mouth was full of her as she buckled and poured and cried out above him. He kept his tongue pressed upon her, his fingers plunged within her, riding her through her shuddering and pounding and then demanding more. He manipulated his touch, his tongue with all the trickery and coaxing he could bring to bear, and she came again: the shocked, then surrendering noises of her summit more beautiful than, he was certain in that moment, anything else he had ever heard.

He slipped out of her and with both arms hoisted her up higher so that he could lap at her cunt, drink her spend, desperate with yearning, careless of all else. Then his strength wavered; he pulled away, breathed deeply, and eased her, his arms shaking, back into the river; and as she languished, he held her in his arms. And his name, from her lips, pulled him deep under, deep into her, “*Solas*,” and he floated there, with her, holding her - the river cradling them both, and a breeze rippling the

dark and moving water.



## See

“You have changed, old friend,” he murmured.

The spirit shifted, amorphous. Fires of Fade sky pin-pricked through its body.

“And you still do not keep promises, harellan.”

“Not true,” Solas said, heady, even here feeling his wits buzzing with the leaf’s magnification of his spirit, his metaphysical essence attuned to the Fade.

“Many nights. Many dreams it has been since I last found you, harellan.” The spirit’s hide glistened. It was at once smaller than his palm, then again the shape and size of a towering spire.

“I walk paths you know well.” Solas uncrossed his legs. He folded them back with the other foot front. He stroked the earth, remembering with fervor the sweet centuries his spirit had roamed free. A memory of water lifted from the ground. An erosion took place beneath his feet and a mudslide rushed to fill the trench; a century passed in a breath. “Or can you see them no longer?”

The spirit growled. “The paths are nothing to me.”

“Ah. Then I pity you.”

“Oh? And I know whose company you kept.”

That silenced him. Then he said, softly, “I endure.”

The spirit tilted back its head. The chaos of its maw gripped up at the low-slung sky. It made no noise. The earth beneath it shook and cracked apart.

“So, you have killed your Wisdom. And you thought you could escape the notice of old friends?”

“I honor you. I honor what you were.” He kept his expression neutral, carefully placid. “Yet she cautioned me against you. What this world has made of you is an abomination.”

The spirit convulsed, lashed out, and encircled his throat in a cockroach grip of needle-thin claws, the movement against his skin crawling and sharp all at once. It hissed, “I was not made this way by this world, harellan.”

Solas pressed his eyes shut. Inhaled, deeply. Exhaled. He rested his palms open on his knees. “I am sorry. If I had not established the Veil, you would never have been in danger of their corruption -”

The spirit’s retreat was sudden enough to make him pause. He was alone in the clearing.

Then the spirit reappeared in the guise of himself. A perfect mirror, sitting so that their knees touched.

Anarchy asked, “Whose corruption?”

A voice that belonged to neither of them said: “*Look.*”

The spirit bared its teeth. The Fade around them shivered, fled.

Solas woke slowly.

“Look.”

“Mm?” Small rocks rolled beneath his shoulders. He felt he was... floating. His legs listed in the shallow current, and the shore kept him in place.

“Look.” More insistent this time. He felt her arm encircling his chest, her body tucked against his side.

He breathed out, and the taste of her still lingered in his breath. So he filled his lungs and exhaled again, slow, savoring the stick and smell and sweet of her in the back of his throat.

“Up there,” she said, and he fought to open his eyes. The glow of her, cotton-fuzzed by drowse, came into slow focus.

He lifted his hand to stroke her hair. Felt himself smile. Felt his heart turn over in his chest.

“Look behind me,” Pangara instructed, “and across the river. Halfway up the hill at the rock that looks like a magister’s staff.” She paused and waited for him to slide his eyes away from her face and, begrudgingly, up at the spot in the dark.

“Wait,” she said.

He felt suddenly tense.

“What am I -”

“See it?”

He did not.

“Are we - ?” He started to rise and get his elbows underneath him in the crackling riverbed, but she splayed a hand over his chest.

“Don’t move right after looking. They’ll realize.”

“Who?” He did see the shape now, betrayed by a flicker of movement in the shadow of the trees.

“The scout,” she said.

Ah, yes. He felt his body relax.

“So.” He shifted in the water and pulled her to him, the silt of the shore clouding as he dug an arm beneath her. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, pressing his lips into her hair. “The apostate is not left alone to guard the Inquisitor.”

Pangara laughed softly. “Leliana wouldn’t let me out of her sight if I begged.” Her arm shifted and she pressed her head into the crook of his neck.

After a moment he felt her moving. Felt her rubbing her forehead slowly on him, side to side... nuzzling against him, he realized.

He closed his eyes, swallowed, and, with a fluttering in his stomach, felt entirely unprepared for whatever this had become between them.

“The woman is ruthless,” Pangara murmured. “And I can admire her. But she’s tracking me? My every movement? ...I have fought my whole life with things turned the other way. It’s been...”

something I've had to get used to..."

The sounds of the river slipping between its banks and tumbling slowly past boulders worn smooth, piney branches scraping low into the waves, filled the night around him. This was so like all the evenings they had lain side by side and spoken of her burdens. And of his travels, and of the small joys and minutiae of their days. Only... it felt different, now. He was quiet. Stunned by the simple intimacy of her bare skin against his own, and harboring the small hope that she would just keep, *like that* - keep rubbing sedately against his neck, his shoulder.

"I did not understand, really," she said, frustrated, pensive, "the way they thought of their Maker. Their burned woman. What did my mother care for Chantries, or my father? The Keepers spoke of gods in the Beyond. And I learned the stories, too, to pass on. And my uncle taught me this: Andraste promised the Dales for the elves. We were there at the founding of their religion. We fought alongside the shemlen, spilled blood at the side of the wife of their Maker." She turned her head and nibbled just under his jaw, spreading a chime of warmth from his chin down to his gut. The water chanted over, under, and through his legs. Pebbles rocked and shifted beneath his bare back. She resumed the meditative circling of her cheek at the crook of his shoulder and collarbone.

His skin tingled under her slow touch.

Solas' lips went slack. Shallow, quick breaths dried his tongue. He realized he was holding her too tightly. With care, not moving too abruptly in case it might disturb her, he relaxed his grip. Disciplined his expression back to one of polite interest. He breathed deeply, intentionally, pine and herb and the mossy scents of muck and mud coming to him on the night air. And the sweet, light musk he had yet to place, and a warm citrus something she used in her hair smelling stronger now that it was wet - her scent, rubbing against him.

*Ar lath ma*, he groaned, internally, the words like a fevered chant, *ar lath ma, ar lath ma*.

He did not want her to stop.

"And now I sit on a throne. A military for their Maker. Nobles keep close to the center of the hall. They see - what? My pointed ears. My mark. The curtains woven with scenes of Dalish pride, paid for by *their* coin. *Ha*."

Her breath was hot. Her skin was smooth, but the way the water rubbed between them felt clinging and rough. He realized his eyes were glazing, eyelashes drooping. He fought to listen.

The ways she feathered her touch on his chest made him twitch; made his hands, spread wide and hugging her back, clutch. He tried to deny his body's replies to her attentions; but it had been too long, so long since he had known such gentleness. He felt vaguely that one of her legs wrapped over his, but all of his waking mind had been entranced by the affectionate rub of her head, side to side - her lips, her cheek, her forehead, all massaging against him. Mellow, dreamy circles.

The way she nuzzled against him made him a beggar; made him drunk.

*Ar lath ma*, a whimper within him now, and she did not know what she did. *Ar lath ma vhenan*.

Her touch on him was patient.

"Meanwhile, none can convince me that my clan's struggles with Wycome are not a message for me: leader of their holy army."

"Wise," he murmured.

“I’ve known it from the first,” she said.

She blew an exasperated breath against him and the brush of it over his skin sent him someplace else, just the *feeling* of her, like a warm tone filling his head with a song from the center of the sky, and when he surfaced again she was in the middle of some story. He blinked and tried to pick up what she was saying.

“And so we see the roots of isolationism. The other clans may tut, ‘We warned them,’ yet our knowledge of the shemlen preserved them in years before. Did you know, it was Lavellan who first knew of the *sav’dhal* poisonings? It was one of the shem women my mother traded yeast starters with. Little village hen. Guess she grew a conscience at the last moment and warned us what her men were planning to do. And so we were able to spread the word to the other clans: ‘do not eat the *sav’dhal* berries this year. Do not let the halla eat them.’ Only one clan was hit - Nadaehn. They’d strayed too far from their usual summer lodgings. Our trackers couldn’t meet them in time.”

Her hair was wet and soft and it left a trace of cold to the air as she brushed side to side against his shoulder. She said, “The deeper we hide, the more vulnerable we are.” And her breath tickled again at the rise of his neck, and he brought his hand up and cupped the back of her head. He stroked her hair as she circled and rubbed against him, and he succumbed to the tenderness of her warmth - the thought of her pulling away at this moment was unbearable. He wanted only for her to go on touching - to go on *pressing* - against him like this: rhythmic and warm and mesmerizing.

*Ar lath ma.*

She moved her hands along his sides, around his back. Traced delicate, fiery touches that made it difficult for him to think. The magic of the Anchor tickled up under his skin. She said, “The shemlen could not strike us down then, and now I command their swords. And the Dalish... we care after their own.”

“And only your own.”

He felt her stiffen against him and then rush to relax, as if to hide that she had heard.

The thought had risen reflexively. Abrasive, yes.

And true.

He pulled away from her, a slight movement - and his body prickled to be so suddenly bereft - and he watched as she drew back, too, and as she judged him also. Her lips quirked and she tilted her head, her hair trailing in the water, her fingers still tracing the back of his neck; she seemed to wait for him to go on.

“I take it,” he said, carefully, “that you intend to turn these swords in the defense of the Dalish.”

There was a crash of the river breaking as two large waterfowl, their bodies black in the night, glided past them and skimmed into the current upstream. Black lotus along the shoreline swayed in the wake.

She looked across to the other shore.

“You know, Solas, that is the longest you have ever gone without interrupting me on the topic of the Dalish.”

He fought to master a chorus of many small betrayals. And she untangled from him, sat up, and

rested her elbows on her knees. Her hips slung low in the riverbed, her body displacing the current in moon-rippled crests. He lay beside her and struggled with warring impulses: to caution her. To encourage her.

She lifted one foot and crossed it on her other knee, belly pudging as she bent to inspect the marks he'd left along her inner thigh. "Look," she mused appreciatively, the light of the Anchor illuminating her fingers around a welt.

He remembered his dreaming, then.

A filtered shout of that *name* pulsed through his mind. *Hunger in a Dalish boy's belly - a belly which feasted on itself, grotesque - the boy pounding his fists on a statue - begging, begging, a last and most dangerous supplication: please, please, please wake up.*

"Solas?"

Her hand touched on his arm.

He looked up at her through a fog, seeing Fade-light arc down from the stars and touch the ground across the shore, fizzling on the stone horizon of this unchanging realm.

He saw the way her eyes flicked over his body, then drifted to look up over his head. Could she perceive the shivering sphere of his aura, as he so easily saw hers?

The horizon wavered. The hills of the Plains appeared to crack at their tops; it was a blurred hallucination, but not unpleasant - innocuous, the way their stones appeared to float into the night sky. Into the milky pool of moonlight vibrating off the faces of the moons.

Her touch steadied him.

This way of pushing at another's mood, the intimate guiding of another's thoughts and cares... this reminded him of closeness that was many hundreds of centuries past. The thrill of these habits again, and shared with *her*, trembled within him.

He made certain his face betrayed nothing.

"I... Solas, I don't choose to confide in you only because you're the only Elvhen man around. I hope you know I trust you. I'd hoped you would speak with me on these thoughts. The way you talk to Sera, at times..." She uncurled and paddled her toes in the shallow water.

The vision of the boy. He must control it. He must... He wove a chorus within his waking mind to protect his spirit and spoke it, concentrating, into the unlocked spaces of his dreaming.

"I'd hoped that you could... advise me." She said this last quietly, frowning to herself, the weight of every decision she must now make in the lines around her eyes.

Being still in the cowl of the leaf, he was empowered to merely suggest the spell. And he did not often try to hide his magic from her, yet in this, and in deception, his magic remained skilled. As she spoke, it took only a twitch or two of his fingers. She did not notice him reinforcing the night-thinned Veil around them.

The bolster muted the presence of the Fade. The night pulled back into solidity. The ease he'd felt with the leaf - it drained away.

He sobered.

And, verifying his suspicions, the remnants of the vision of the Dalish boy darted out of his thoughts. He felt it there still, hunched in the back of his mind. Yet its dissonance was buried by the strengthened Veil.

Emptiness pricked in his chest.

*They came to him then, it was certain, across the Fade. Dreams? Dreams, they must then be... only dreams, after all. And some sympathetic magic - memories, or... this may be something perhaps similar to what he had started to experience around her, bearer of his mark...*

*Bearer of the mark. Ma vhenan.*

*Ar lath ma. Ir abelas. I am so sorry. What can I offer, what could I give to you to say...*

He sat up. He adjusted his knees, stretching out a tightness in his calves, and felt his seat in the riverbank settle. Pangara waited for him to speak. Or perhaps she was content to simply let the matter drop, if he would not answer her. A darting shadow fluttered away from his side.

He re-evaluated all she had spoken of.

He considered.

It would not be prudent to encourage her.

Even so... at this point the question was entirely theoretical. An exercise in thought. An intriguing inclination, certainly. And she valued his insight - not only because of her affection, but because she respected him. Respected the truth. She wanted to listen. Was receptive, despite her upbringing. Despite her own convictions.

He smiled softly.

“You have amassed great power, yet your ability to act remains limited.”

Her hands grazed lazily on the water. She reached down and brushed something off the top of her foot.

“To seize an army in the name of the Dalish would require,” he paused and considered. “An unshakeable moral mandate. And even so your methods would, at times, require a ruthlessness that may undermine the cause of all elves. Could you maneuver the organization of the Inquisition in service of your goals, while remaining at its helm?”

She nodded slowly, then touched her fingers together as she thought.

“I am exposed. And so, being too much exposed, I am vulnerable. Any effort to redirect the Inquisition for the elves in a meaningful way, beyond the protection of my own clan, would be discovered. Quickly, and with consequence.” She rocked, clearly frustrated, and gestured up at the hill. “I am always being watched.”

“Your intentions would be known at once,” he agreed. Questions and counsel pressed in his thoughts; advise her indeed. Yet, he must keep her focused. “Fighting Corypheus, healing the Veil, and retrieving the Orb of our people are endeavors which must command all of the resources of the Inquisition.”

Droplets sprayed on his face as Pangara stood. The rubbing of her welted feet on the rocks made her bounce onto her toes. She turned away from him. He studied the patterns of welts on her thighs

and calves. She stretched her arms over her head and he watched the curve of her back, the rise of her backside, and the taut ropes of muscle in her thighs, wet from the river.

He knew he should not go on.

And yet... how long could he deny she was intoxicating to him? A welcome departure from the dispassionate suffering of the city elves, the detached self-interest of most of the Dalish. Unique. She recalled a world of fierce passions - she spoke like victory before all victories turned to dust. That he had seen her lead, and lead well, was a relief.

And there had been so many permissions he had allowed himself this night.

He did not want to acknowledge how this was a feeling too recklessly hopeful.

*No harm*, he thought. *No harm*.

“When that battle is complete, ma vhenan, we may yet speak of a different world,” he promised.

And she looked down at him: radiant, and did he know what would come to pass, truly? When the Orb was in his power, so much could be decided.

Still, although he smiled softly in return, he could not pretend that the look she gave him now - her trust, her grateful relief - was anything he deserved to share.

She wobbled on her feet, unbalanced, rivulets drying on her calves. Had the leaf run its course for her? He tried to tell by looking up at her eyes if her spirit still half-touched the Fade; he envied her if it did.

Then Pangara’s smile tilted, wicked. She gestured up at the hill.

“So, do you think our audience has enjoyed their show of elves cavorting in the moonlight?”

He relaxed, knee dropping to one side while his fingers laced around the other.

“Possibly the scout was merely roused,” he mused, “by the echoes of your cries ringing through the hills.”

She snorted and pushed his legs downstream.

“Smug.”

“Unless I am mistaken, I have every right to be.” He couldn’t hide a small, satisfied smirk. Then he caught his hand moving to laze a touch up her thigh and curled his fingers against his breeches instead. He leaned forward, looking down into the water. The reflection of the moon wavered behind a cloud. His own eyes gleamed back at him, and then he saw hers, too, shining in the water. She slid a leg between his knees. He stared at it, at her, so close - so easy to embrace, so easy to *hold*.

*How was this happening for him?*

*Duplicity*, his mind supplied.

His heart sank.

Pangara held out her hand and he could not look up - could not meet her eyes - as he set his palm in hers. She stroked her fingers down his wrist, his forearm. Then she guided his hand, much to his

rising heat, up her leg and then to the tucked bush at her thighs. She rested his fingers on her soft hairs.

“Solas. *This* was not what I *meant*, ” she teased, “when I asked for ‘anything.’”

He felt the rippling of the Anchor against his palm. His gaze intent on the welts and pink rises hillocking her skin, he reached out with a whisper of his magic. The energy slid down her legs, green wisplight encircling her from the waist down and tendrils raising to the florets on her stomach.

She felt his healing and made a murmuring protest.

“Leave them.”

They had far to go. It was not practical to leave the marks of his passions to rub and to lame her, when at any moment she would be called to battle.

“There will be others,” he said softly.

She made an indistinguishable noise of *yearning*, and it disrupted his concentration on the healing.

“Hush, vhenan.” His throat felt thick.

She stood above him and let him tend to her again, only this time they attracted a press of discernable attention against the Veil. Many delicate frequencies of mending, aid, and benevolence. No spirit was so fully formed that it would speak a name to him should he meet it again in dreams, yet all were attracted by his magic; by the strength of his feeling for her wellbeing.

These small sprites assisted in the mending of her flesh. He let their energies trickle through the Veil: carefully, not too quickly. He was firm with the application of the spell, guiding it skillfully around his own fortifications, and even so she wriggled.

“This is not what I mean either, old dreamer.”

He glanced past the green glow of the healing magic, back over the river at the shape of the scout. It drew something from its cloak and a moment later raised a hand to its cowl.

“What you *intend* is known to me,” he said quietly. “And you do not mind our audience? Leliana may well have already received the raven.”

“I mind that Leliana will know by sunrise, yes. But I accept that even my private life has become part of the,” she waved the hand with the Anchor, “job. As for the scout watching?” She shifted her knees, soft and coy. “No. Not at all. Let them watch, if they’re so fascinated.”

Solas nodded, distracted by manipulating the Veil to tuck the tiny spirits back into their place, a gentle hum of magic thanking them for their work and encouraging them to retreat peacefully back into the Fade. “I do not mind either,” he said.

Her laugh was quick. “I have never thought you would.”

“Oh? You have never? Implying...?” He leaned back and examined the healing from her feet up her legs, from her knees to between her thighs. His gaze lifted naturally further: up to her stomach, her breasts. He let his gaze linger there, memorizing the shapes of the dark coins around her nipples.



She was smirking down at him when he glanced to her face. He twisted his wrist in a way that indicated she should spin, and she did, turning as she spoke.

“Implying,” she said, “that although you’ve spent a great deal of your life alone, Solas, I don’t think you’d mind stirring me hard on a roof while a crowd watched on. I think you’d enjoy it - you’d work to make me forget the eyes of the world; to make me forget whether it was night or day, or if I’d ever had a name. Until you were the only thing left for me to beg for.”

He warred against a flush of heat. *Intriguing*, he forced himself to think, blandly, this notion that *she* had thought of them in this position, that this was a fantasy *she* had concocted.

“And how did you come to this... vivid conclusion?”

Pangara smirked and finished her turn and, bracing her arms on his shoulders, she straddled his lap. Her knees dug into the rocks on either side of his hips, her breasts wet as she arched, every bit the exaggerated harlot, against his chest. She brought one finger to his chin, lightly stroking over the rise of his throat. She guided his head to tilt to one side. She brought her lips to his ear.

What she spoke of made him close his eyes, made him shudder - his hands dropping to rest on her knees.

“How have I known,” she whispered, “that you’ve wanted to fuck me from behind, bent over the desk in your study? Known you’ve wanted my lips grinding on yours as you try not to grunt on the battlements? Known you would strip me to my waist, these long hands covering my tits as you fucked me *hard* in the garden of some shem palace? Oh, Solas. *Really?*”

He was glad that she had turned his face aside, that she was not watching his expression. That she could not see how his lips first betrayed him with a smirk, then how his jaw clenched as she continued, and how a desperate grimace crept into his eyes. And he disciplined his face to careful neutrality when she bit his ear and licked inside its scroll, her tone mocking softly, “How do I know that you’re the kind of man who wants to show me how he can make me *beg?*”

Heat. Appetite. Shame. *Want*.

Control.

He answered, flatly, “Fascinating, that you so desire to beg, when not *moments* ago you proved yourself insufficient to the task.”

“Mm? How so.”

“Only that I have seen you control your release twice this night.”

She became very still.

“And in the end, you took it. Twice, if I am not mistaken. And I do mean ‘*took*,’ lethallin. Stole. As if all civility had fled you for - what? A little rub between your thighs?”

She gave him a level stare. “As I recall, the commands made by your lips were very clear.”

“Ah, so then, have you so little restraint, vhenan? So that a few lazy kisses,” - she choked on a laugh and he stressed, wrapping his arms around her, “*gentle, chaste* kisses, can make you forget yourself so completely?”

“Lazy and chaste.”

“Mhm.” He leaned forward and, as it was so convenient, he placed her breast in his lips. Her moan was more of a whine, a sound that wavered as he opened his teeth and suckled her nipple lightly up beneath his tongue.

“The kisses you bestowed, just so,” she spoke through a gasp, pressing her breast forward against his face as he tipped his tongue in petite circles, “when you lifted me into the sky? I’d assumed you were only - *mmm* - making good on a promise.”

He pulled away, all considerate confusion. “Were you unaware that I expect you to ask for permission before your release?”

When her eyes narrowed in this way it took everything in him not to laugh.

She accused, “You’re being stern and legalistic in anticipation of punishing me.”

“I *am* stern and legalistic,” he said, unable to resist a small grin. “Punishing you is merely an enjoyable side benefit.”

She huffed, then tried to ply him, “But are you truly unhappy, Solas? Did it not please you to have me helpless?”

He returned with a stare. “Helpless? I have never seen you thus.”

That made her flush, discernable even in the dark, since of course he had seen her both panicked and injured - and now also bound and blindfolded and splayed before him in ropes.

And yet she would, and would not, submit.

A breeze rustled the trees behind him. She moved fast; she wrenched both of his wrists up, twisted them, and pinned them behind his back. Challenging, vicious, she pressed close to his chest. He let her have the play of dominance, lip curling.

“You won’t punish me for something you enjoyed,” she insisted. “I know it pleased you that you made me wake the scout. I know you want us known.”

“You assume to know what I want, and you mean to distract me.” He made his voice smooth and certain and calm, hiding any playfulness that threatened to ruin the game. “Try any distraction you like, but let me assure you, *ma vhenan*: For taking your pleasure without asking, I will see you punished.”

Her skin buzzed beneath his hands and he saw her small hairs frizz as a roll of pleasure crested over her arms, legs, décolletage, breasts, and shoulders. *This* reaction he liked. She bared her teeth and snarled, and he felt a wild rush of vigor flood his body. Youthful heat, heady and powerful, whipped up his blood.

Grunting, he lunged out at her - freed his arms and wrapped her legs around him. Hoisted her up his lap. He stood. Waded out into the deeper water as she wrestled, kicking and squirming in his arms and gasping, cursing him in broken Elvhen. He kept her well-secured against his chest, cradling her, dipping a line of kisses along her shoulder, up her neck.

“You believe you know so much, Inquisitor,” he crooned, lifting her higher above the waves, “And yet you’ve not the first notion of what I would do to you, given the chance.” She screeched, a small playful noise, and battled against him. The cool river pulled at his legs, splashing up around his breeches. His feet sunk and tangled in the slime of grassy streamstalk twisting up from the rocks. She pushed against him to escape.

He chuckled. Held her out over the water. "You wish to be released?"

She looked down at the water and looked back up at him. Something in her expression changed, and she shook her head.

She said, with an odd half-smile, "*Fen'Harel*."

He righted her at once and helped her gain her balance in the water. He kept his hands clear of her except to support her against the current. And when she had her feet under her, he asked, "Are you alright?"

"Yes." She looked away from him; he saw her eyes squeezing shut. Then, to his consternation, she raised her fingers to the pulse-point on her neck and she took a steadying breath. "I just didn't want that."

He allowed himself to reach out and brush her wet hair back from her eyes.

"Thank you for telling me," he said, softly, realizing the root of her alarm. Recognizing the twist within her spirit; he remembered finding the Inquisitor rocking in fear against the wall in a burned-out hovel, or behind a tree, clutching her knees and staring dead-eyed at her own shoulder until she soothed herself back to the surface.

His impulsiveness had startled her.

He regretted it.

... And if she said that word again, he might break.

He might... he did not know what he might do.

He examined her face, her stance. Stood close, but not pressing, while she moderated her spirit.

And so, how to remove the title from their intimacy?

*Remove the intimacy*, the best, the kindest solution sneered out from his conscience.

Seeing her this way - vulnerable, and so trusting - grim certainty closed in on his heart. He could not allow her to rely on him. He must remove himself. He was resolved as he could not bring himself to be before.

"I am so sorry, vhenan," he started. Then he hesitated. He should allow her time to come fully into herself. He rested his shoulders back, tucked his wrist against the small of his back and held it loosely with his other hand.

The river moved around their legs; the cackle-call of a nightjay answered another up in the treeline. The noise startled their free-grazing mounts; her hart bucked out of the shadow of the forest and then trotted across the plain into their camp. It slowed around the wispy plume of the firepit and then stopped, swaying its head side to side. It nosed against the side of her tent. Finding no one sliding a carrot or a bundle of plumroot out between the flaps, the great hart turned and shook. Her tent glowed from within - the lamp was still burning. The hart wheeled back into the night.

Pangara took a rasping desperate breath and plunged and he stopped himself from lunging forward, and when she surfaced she was laughing at herself and spitting up a mouthful.

"Let's go, let's go." She took his hand.

But was it too rash, to pull away from her now? The warmth of her hand in his reminded him of what she needed. She needed this; she chose him. And... even this light holding, this gentle contact, fractured his resolve.

He fumbled for what was left to him, making his tone light as he said, "I would have you use another word, lethallin."

She grinned back at him over her shoulder and replied, "I know."

"I - you know?"

"I saw your face this time. Why didn't you tell me at the start? Naming the dawnstar may be conventional, but Solas - I think you and I are hardly that." She stumbled, and he reached to steady her. "So, you are worried that the Bringer of Nightmares will hear his name?"

It was an effort of will not to roll his eyes. Bringer of Nightmares. Good grief.

He asked instead, indulging a moment of curiosity as they navigated to shore, "And if the Dread Wolf could hear your call?"

"The trickster only hears his name when it a fool is cursed by it," she reasoned. He felt a twisting at the bottom of his ribs.

She stopped in the water. Half-turned to look at him, a decided curiosity in her eyes. She shifted closer.

"We need," he repeated, very controlled, "A new word."

"Not Fen'Harel?" And the way she had started to say this word was different; he should have anticipated this. She would not pass this up, not after his own promises of torture.

"No," he reaffirmed.

"Strange, but... alright. It's only meant to be an alarm, to ask for help."

"Then might I suggest anything else?"

"Anything you like. Would the midday star, Dol'uilin, be better?" She offered, reasonable enough.

"Thank you, yes," he said, and she nodded.

"It just seems oddly superstitious." She said. "For you."

"It is not superstition," he said, too quickly, and immediately regretted it.

"No?"

Then she looked back over her shoulder, grinning, and seemed to think herself well in possession of some bewitching new toy. "You... liked hearing it, perhaps, earlier?"

"No." He did not like the gleam in her eye. "What gave you that impression?"

"Just curious. If you'd rather have me call for the traitor for some other reason..." Her feet sunk into the shore as they waded from the river and as they neared the fire she turned and pulled on his hips, drawing him by his breeches close to her naked body. Long grasses tickled his ankles and his pelvis hooked forward, pulled against her sweetly-puckered belly.

“No,” he said, looking down at her, and *not* slipping a hand around her back.

“No? You’d not like to bear his name? Then... perhaps another fantasy. It’s common enough. The defender, perhaps? Would you like it if I draw the wolf’s attention to myself? So you can fight him off. Protect me. Fen’Harel,” she whispered.

“No,” he shook his head, tried to step back. She pulled him, insistent, captivating, to herself, laying her body against his chest, brushing a touch to guide his head down to hers.

“Solas, you don’t want him to catch my scent? Fen’Harel,” she moaned against his neck.

“Desist,” he breathed, and his eyes were closed, and what he felt rejoicing in his heart was a sickening betrayal of everything he had resolved to despise about himself.

Then she reached low and cupped him in her hand.

He shuddered as she stroked where the wet and clinging from the river made his crotch bulge in his breeches. The night air was quickly turning cold against the cotton. He felt his subtle bolstering of the Veil waver, spike, and then shamefully drop away. Awareness of the Fade crashed back upon him - only the half-dreaming of the elfroot, but still something that rushed to fill the gaping space at the core of his spirit with visions both inspiring and beguiling.

And as he struggled to open his eyes and as she stroked - *stroked* him, he saw her radiant. He saw the glamour of her life - her thousand thousand memories - rioting in her aura.

*Ar lath ma*, it pounded in his chest. *Ar lath ma, ar lath ma, ar lath ma...*

“Would you protect me from the Dread Wolf, old dreamer?” She teased.

When he could breathe again he warned her, “I do not know if I can,” and he saw the glistening light of the Fade bleeding in again at the corners of his gaze, his buzz stalking comfortably back into the fabric of his mind - pouring into the hole in his chest, bouying him from his stiffness and fear, rolling back the rigidity of the earth. Hedy. Wonderful. And she was at the center of it. And he shook his head, confounded, and pulled her into an embrace, and then into a deep and devastating kiss - the wry squint of her smile as he put his lips to hers burning in his mind as he coiled over her, eyes shut tightly as he pressed the heat and wet and wanting of his mouth to hers.

When he pulled away she eased her toes onto his toes, and he felt he might fall forward if she stopped grounding him like this. She said, “So, what would my punishment be?”

And he chuckled as he said again, kissing her neck, her chin, “Ah, vhenan. You’ve not the slightest notion of what I would do to you.”

And she dodged his lips and nestled her head against his chest as she whispered, “Let me see if that’s true, traveler. Show me. *Show me.*”

## Surrender

How gently her fingers touched along his own, moving from knuckle to knuckle, mapping the lineaments of his workman's hands, the knicks and cuts from chopping wood and whittling his staff, and those scars from cutting elfroot along the leaf-spine and squeezing the juice into mortar pots.

He felt the weight of whispers pushing down. *So many names, and so many shadows sitting in fear: they were fathers hiding terror from their children, whittling by the fire, whittling down sad smiles.*

*Powerless.*

*"You are here again, harellan," Anarchy said, perceiving him through the haze.*

*"Begone, old friend," he said silently, meaning, 'do not look at her.'*

"Why don't you heal your hands?" Pangara asked.

"I have healed them," Solas said. The twisted ghost of Anarchy chuckled and retreated from his thoughts. There was still water clinging to his hands and wrists and arms. River trickled, tickling, down his stomach. Pangara was dry, her skin downy. The small smoke from the fire followed and clung to her hair. He was a fool.

When the sun had set she had been distant from him, tense, all sharp puzzle edges, and now she was a swaying softness in the night, her aura gold and glistening, calling him down away from sorrows.

"Why don't you smooth away the scars?" she said.

"That the wounds have scarred is enough," he said.

"I want you to give me scars," she said softly, "I cannot heal." She stepped on his toes and stroked his hands, placing her lips on the insides of his wrists and arms.

"I shall bear that in mind," he whispered, failingly, watching her turn over his hands. She leaned her head against his chest.

*I am a fool.* In the wake of his fallen barrier, how the world jolted and changed; the night shifted around him, around her. From the Fade, a vivid vision arose into his consciousness: a golden pomegranate, its seeds exposed. He watched, benumbed, as a bright wisp landed on the glimmering skin. *This is the crest of the leaf*, his mind supplied him. The bitter variety of elfroot he smoked and the oil he consumed to escape into half-dreaming manifested such hallucinations at the height of their influence. Such dreams dripped through. The vision of the waspy wisp gnawed into the ripe meat; it buried into the slick, tart seeds of the pomegranate.

Solas closed his eyes very slowly. The best thing to do, he rationalized with an effort, shaking the vision from his mind and blinking, hard, to see the world somewhat restored, and Pangara before him, bewitching, whole, and smiling wryly - the *only* thing to do was to accept the journey of the leaf through his mind. Where it took him, he would go. If visions such as these, dreams, touched his thoughts while waking? If they revealed this window to the Fade to him? Perhaps her mind was similarly opened, vulnerable, reaching.

*If all reality were illusion, and all illusion dream, and the wellspring of life itself dreams from the realms beyond, then perhaps...*

Was she feeling quite well, or was her mind conjuring such hallucinations through the Veil? That was what he should ask. But, “Are you a dream?” he heard his own voice in a whisper, the thought coming to him from a peculiar distance somewhere overhead. He spoke it, and he felt like he was spiralling away.

“I want to get hit,” she said, blunt, all rough passion. She did not indicate that she had heard him.

This well-shocked his wandering mind: Solas slammed back into his body. Wide-eyed, he watched her desire skitter over her skin and travel up his wrists and arms in small ripples of her mana. He forgot his question, and his uncertainty, and when she hooked the band of his trousers forward he staggered, held onto her, kissed her forehead, and sternly convinced his knees that they could *not* buckle.

The energies of the Fade welled up from the soil underfoot, dripped like rain off the tents, fell like hail into the slithering river.

And still he felt her taste between his teeth, good in the craters he touched with his tongue, his jaw aching pleasantly. Grasping for lost control, he tried to explain, “In jest, my heart. I have no aim to strike you, meaning only... my intent was not to make you feel... I should do no such thing, with our connection to the Fade so open.” Yet, as he spoke, as her naked body slid against him, as her touch floated over the bulge in his wet trousers between their pressed-together bodies, he failed, and failed, and failed.

“You said I would be punished, Fen’Harel,” she said, teasingly, and this was the last he could endure.

He grimaced. *Resist her*, the stern thought meandered through his clouded mind. And from somewhere else in the murk of his wits, he remembered Cole, stepping carefully around a rabbit den, saying, “*More pain, more joy than anyone can bear, and yet they embrace it.*”

*Love*. He had answered, thinking himself detached, “*How could they not?*”

His hands slid down her back. His palms splayed over her ass. He commanded, at last, in a hoarse whisper, “Beg, then.”

“Oh, you *do* like that. Would you give me reason to obey you?” she countered, the coquette.

He tightened his grip, and the feeling of her cheeks gathered in his hands made him think of tightness, rough and rippling. “You’ve proven your knowledge of the traditions of Vas’lath forms, title conventions, and the begging of pleasure,” he chided, barely summoning the strength for such a lecture. “You should know to obey out of a passion to be obedient.”

To indulge, would be far too dangerous.

“... Then give me something to fear,” she tried. He only snorted in response, rolling his eyes and resting his chin on her shoulder.

Solas’ gaze glided down Pangara’s back and appraised how much of each cheek, if he adjusted his hands here and there, he could manage to hold in hand.

Her clipped “ah”s and “hey”s when he tested his estimates made him chuckle.

“You needn’t make your gasps echo with such scandal, my heart,” he said with warmth, dancing his thigh subtly between her legs.

“Do you lay such claims for the benefit of the scout?” she asked wryly.

“Merely a sophisticated experiment in relative area...” he mumbled, and then he squeezed, and she yelped. “... A most intellectual and - *mm* - rigorous study.”

She coughed, whether from surprise, longing, or offense, he could not say. Yet she proved not so easy to distract, asking coyly, “Would you give me something to look forward to, on our long trek home?”

He hid his smile against her neck.

That was closer.

“Give me,” she said finally, pressing the weight and warmth of her lap down onto his thigh so that he felt her, bare and wanting, on his trousers, “something wonderful to dream of, ma vhenan, Papae, old dreamer. Fen’Harel.” She lifted her fingers gently to the back of his neck. She pressed her face softly against his collarbone and rubbed her cute nose up his chin. Her lips pressed to the side of his mouth.

Solas smiled, letting himself gentle, his eyes closing.

Tenderness like a hot stone blocked his throat. If she asked like that - yes, *oh*, yes. He would do anything for her.

*Admit you are a fool.*

How he ached for the alchemy she made around that word. How simply she plucked a foul legend from the stars, from stories, and from his hated, confused memories: and how gently she unfolded those words, and showed him something in them that was good, that could be good and *wanted* once more. She had first spoken in fear and pain, and now she spoke with such cajoling, sweet tenderness. What should he think, of being addressed so in passion? Had he desired this, once? ... Yes - and long he had known such desire to be despicable. Yet, she said these words playfully, like bright small chimes, and he thought... he thought, if there were no false pretence, if this were safe...

A fever of dizziness sat behind his eyes. He held her.

It was apparent she’d discovered how he wanted to be coaxed, and knew it. She murmured her supplications in the blue light from the deep night moons, growing in poetry and ardor, slipping words of filth and sweet devotion into the small spaces left between them, filling everything up under his arms with truth.

“You have such potential. Show me meanness, wanderer. Fen’Harel. Vhenan, *ar lath ma*, hurt me,” she begged.

“*Ar lath ma*,” he murmured back to her, watching her heartbeat surge and ripple in her neck, so close to her that he saw the riverbed lines in her skin. The pink mark of his lips, where he’d suckled her neck the last time she had let him come this close, swam in front of his eyes. Her nipples touched against him, bare, and he felt a hot, cattish pleasure, a desire to take her breast in hand and suck her tit into his mouth.

Oh, he *held* her. She was warm; his arms enfolded her. Nuzzling, she murmured against his neck



and kissed his shoulders. He held her and pressed his face against her hair. Her hands stroked up his back; his, ungentlemanly, jostled her ass, aware of how such bouncing inspirited the lewd shifting of her cunt against his thigh.

Around him the earth spun; the river was flooded with fractals from the stars; the Fade-lights that touched down to the earth did not fizzle out now, but glimmered just beyond the treeline, winking and walking and taking the shapes of long-limbed people, then dissolving back into aether on the wind.

She ducked her head. She placed her lips, her hot breath, around one of his nipples. The flick of her tongue shot a feeling through him like sleet ricocheting off the bend of his spine, and he released her at once, twisting and yelping.

“*Unnecessary*,” he complained.

She chortled and leaned back against his chest.

“Do you intend to pique my ire, da’len?” he asked, nosing into her neck, cupping her shoulders loosely and biting just under her ear.

“Only to please you, Fen’Harel,” she recalled, her body shivering in his grip, yearning.

He broke. *Oh*, this was squalid. But a sound like a wheeze escaped him and he held her tighter, trying to swallow, feeling heat in his head and in his blood beating back to her, ‘*please, please, please.*’

The foamy smoke of the leaf still tingled in his lungs. The only thing to do was to ride out the high; the world changed, and he realized, too late, desperately, that he was changing with it.

He could not admit to himself how he feared what would await him, should he drop into dreams tonight.

He fumbled her hands into his. He cupped her fingers, his grip jerking, her fingers trembling.

They were both tired. This was ill-advised. Sweat was beading on the top of his head and on his shoulders. The herb stalked, indolent, through his mind, and he imagined that she was cresting on her high, too, given the hoarse, low compulsion of her voice, like wicked rains on wheat ready for harvest, coughing in the windy fields.

They should sleep.

Instead, he turned his mouth to hers. He kissed her. She was frantic, craving, and he recognized this frenzy. But he was in no position to manage or control it.

He felt it, too.

“*Elvaredhis*, but first, a hunt, if you would have such,” he said, tasting the leaf on her lips when they came away, and she made a condemned, grateful sound.

So, this word - this practice - had not been lost, either.

His heart thudded.

“Will you need assistance?” he asked.

“No,” she said, “I am prepared. With these new terms?”

Here, this - this was his opportunity to be a good man.

“Yes, *ma malfenasha*. I will be he, who hunts alone.”

This was folly, and she smiled.

“I will always have you, then,” she said, “when I am on the road and the star rises. When I fell in love, it was not supposed to happen this way. There was to be an aravel. There was to be a life shared, not flung across such distance. We are not conventional,” she spoke as if she missed him already, her gaze bright in the night.

“No,” he leaned his forehead against hers, unable to let her see his eyes. “You are extraordinary.”

In the underbrush edging the wood, their mounts stomped and startled as wind pushed through the plants and made the leaves tremble, the colors of the shadows changing, becoming voices, and then returning to shadow. There was more elfroot at the treeline, and greater varieties than dotted the edge of the river. It grew up through the sowthistle, the nutsedge, and the slender willowherb - fighting against the weeds and reaching up for the light above; it was elfroot which grew in tusk-like curves out from under the shadows of the forest canopy.

Her hands were so small in his. He bent low and kissed each tip of her fingers, and when his eyes tracked up her neck, her cheek, he saw that she assessed him with keen, smug eyes.

He felt that power deep within him sluiced to a fine, cold stream.

She pulled.

She challenged.

He held her hands; his grip tightened. The Anchor’s light fizzled and popped in her palm. Fade-touched by the herb, he saw its light as a symphony, then as a single softly-whispered lullaby. Pangara wrenched back, and he didn’t let her go.

The sweet became struggle. He was so close to her: the grieving queen was gone, and she was all warrior and tactician in his trap. He squeezed, harder now, advancing and pushing her back across the uneven ground of the campsite. He stalked tall and used his breadth to control the space of their engagement.

Pangara stumbled. Grim, he clenched the delicate give of the tender bones in her hands, her skin rubbing pink under his whitening grip.

She scowled, shimmied to one side, and let her knees give out. But he was ready for a trick like this, anticipating (how often had he watched her fight?) - and he captured her elbow and dragged her back upright. He shook her by the elbow, once, again, and thrice, hard, her whole back twisting, until she locked her knees and quit melting towards the ground. She yelped her displeasure; he was grunting. Confident, now, in her surrender, he roughly readjusted his hands to hold her wrists, holding them together; he was holding them taut and trapped. Her fingers spidered helplessly in the air. He pressed his forehead against hers, breathing in the heat and rage of her entrapment, feeling her try feebly, then violently, to wrench her hands free.

“You wish to be brought to heel, *ma malfenasha*?” he asked tightly.

“Oh, have I *confused* you?” she snarled. “I heard you were clever, harellan.”

He chuckled drily to hear her address him so. She thrashed, leaned away, pulled sharply down, and

twisted. He had to shift his fingers to keep her trapped, setting his feet widely, going back on his heels. Her whitened skin flooded with pink wherever he released her. She took an opening: her right hand slipped free from his grasp, and he realized what she was going to do before she did it - she made a sound of victory and pounced, slipping her hand down between their bodies. She pressed her palm open against him, cupping the soft weight of his cock through his wet breeches.

Solas struggled to breathe and rocked back. She pressed forward. He stumbled, this time, and the backs of his legs hit one of the stumps in the path of the flume of smoke from the near-dead fire.

She squeezed his breeches and they wrinkled and chafed him, still soaked and tight as they were with river water.

Solas closed his eyes and panted past the spit thick on his teeth.

His hips snapped against her touch. There was, within him, a faint protestation of his conscience, somewhere underneath the murky blend of leaf and the briney, tight taste of her sex still coating his tongue.

Somewhere underneath the soothing, familiar edges of the Fade oozing brightly-colored visions in the night, he knew he had smoked too much, retreated too far.

*He should not do this.*

Up under her hair, at the knob of her spine, he gripped the back of her neck and made as if to pry her off of him like an errant kitten, grasping the short, stubby hairs at her nape and the meat of her muscle beneath. He jerked her back.

Instead of letting go, she whimpered, tightened her grip on his cock, and rapidly jerked him off; moaning, he was reduced to just hanging there, off of the back of her neck, clinging to her like he might collapse and rutting into her hand.

She found the outline of his tip through the fabric of his breeches and thumbed it in wide, smug circles. He lunged his lips in a kiss on her exposed neck, humping her hand like a brutish animal. Her arm flattened between their bodies, her hand holding onto him as he jerked his hips into the forbidden touch of her fingers.

An sudden sharp summoning of storm sent shivers through his cock. It brought another pleased moan dribbling through his teeth. He was shamefully weak to her touch, to her lewd fondling of his prick.

“Drop it, dog,” she mocked.

He twisted her wrist, cruel, back against her forearm.

“Drop it,” she hissed, and swiftly released his cock and smacked it with her free hand. It was an awkward, stunted hit, but it still sent a bright shock of panic through his body. His vision tunneled to the mark on her neck, pink like a frosted sweet.

Solas grimaced, bared his teeth against her neck, and latched on. The scent of the river was on her skin and then the taste of it was in his mouth.

“*Drop it,*” she said again, harshly, now past a thickness that sounded like leather on her tongue.

Solas closed his teeth, tightly, into the lean long muscle of her neck, and in his aroused frenzy, did not notice when Pangara shifted her fingers and gripped his testes. Then she *squeezed*.

Not too hard but *hard enough*, and he lifted into his toes with a muffled, low “N-noo” into her skin; he immediately released the hand he’d twisted against her wrist. Out of the corner of his eye he watched color flood back into her fingers. He panted, spit trickling from the sides of his open mouth as his breath *sissed* against the indent of her skin. Her hand, on his balls, cinched tighter. Solas swallowed, pain blossoming in pink and purple motes behind his eyes. He was forced to sit down, heavily, onto the stump bumping the backs of his calves. He did not release his bite upon her neck, so his collapse wrenched her down, too. Her squeezing of his balls did not let up, and the sharp, vomity pain lanced through his testes and belly as she bent over him.

A rope of longing whipped straight up to his heart, even as he whimpered wordlessly in the back of his throat.

How much, in this moment, did he ache to order her to hold a paddle, angle it between his legs, and swing?

“Drop it,” she gasped again, balancing her free hand on his chest, giving his balls a mean twist.

He licked the taste of her between his teeth and fought a bright lance of pain through his head. The urge to gag was finally overwhelming. His teeth came away from her neck with a sloppy sound.

She released his testes.

When they met each other’s eyes it was all sullen grit and quick low breaths. He fought the urge to vomit.

The cut fir stump was still sappy. Its roots were chopped short and splayed at angles around his feet. The seat of the stump proved wide enough for Pangara to sidle both her knees up around his thighs, and he watched the predatory slink in her as she eased forward and crawled up onto his lap, bringing her tits close to his lips, covering his crotch with the heat between her legs; he knew that he had served her well, that the fight in her was sated, that she had taken what she needed from him here. She relished her conquest, and he indulged her. It might have been either of them victorious in the hunt. Had it been he, he would have enjoyed teasing her with his touch, keeping her just on the edge of fulfillment until the sun had broken the hills.

The mark on her neck was deeply red, almost purple in the creases left by his teeth.

“Hurt me much harder than that,” she said, and he shivered, his fingers twitching uselessly at his sides while her hands, blotchy with future bruises, wandered and stroked down his chest.

Her touch rested, finally, over his cock.

“Is that all you’ve wanted?” he murmured.

She gathered him full in hand and wrenched his flopping member up, and the Anchor fitzed. His whole body heaved up against her. He heard a high whine from somewhere, and realized that he’d made that sound. His fingers wrenched up into her hair, his nails tight against her skull.

When she coughed at that, and croaked, “*Dol’uilin*,” he released her hair at once, shakily sliding his hands down the back of her neck. She stroked him, and he wrapped both arms desperately, avidly around her shoulders. His chin rested against her ear.

The moons flickered in the sky. His mind was whorling up away from the top of his skull and touching on the tips of the stars as she stroked him, plying her touch clumsily around him through the sheepskin of his river-wet breeches. She was so warm, and his legs were cold. Her fingers dug against him. They breathed into each others’ mouths, loud, whispers of, “*You want that*,” ... “*I*

want, yes,” ... “More,” exchanged mindlessly on the swell of lust that gripped them.

Strings on the stars, the whole landscape around him half-floating: his spirit crested on the leaf-hallucination. He remained soft, his cock limp but her touch travelling through him like a maddening buzz. The leaf had touched all through his body, and the pain of her grip had left him with a lingering sharp sense of sick in his gut. Over-sensitized, he was beholden to a mixture of pleasure and agony from her fingers. The agony slowly receded, replaced only by the rough lurching of longing and sweet, desperate want.

When she pushed his thighs apart wider, he let his legs fall open as far as they could go with her knees still splayed around him, leaning back and gripping the edges of the stump; his chin tilted back, and he watched between their bodies where her fingers traced the seams of his breeches. He recalled distantly that he’d been trying to maintain a wall of some kind between himself and the Fade, between himself and this woman, and this desire. But no presence stalked him now, and she touched him, and when he looked at her, she was as a fertile spirit of the moon, dewed in stars like honey, her whole body shimmering, and the leaf kept him limp, but she was good, and he felt good.

Then her warm fingers were at his hips. She pulled at his waistband. She slipped her touch under his ties. She looked up at him.

“I want you, very much,” she said.

He looked at her low-lidded, trying to think of all the reasons he had forbidden this before.

Not one protest came to his thoughts, and he smiled, lazily, at being so delightfully, witlessly free.

*Fool.*

“I’m yours” he admitted, and she peeled the fabric from him slowly, lowering as she did onto the ground between his knees.

He watched her go.

She tugged the river-wet breeches from under his seat. She did not touch his cock as it lolled free of his inseam, but she stared, and he watched her stare. She pulled his breeches down his thighs, his heart clenching as she leaned forward and placed slow, soft pecks over his knee and up his thigh.

Overhead, the snap and flutter of bats circled. They were dark against the night. He could see them by the places where their bodies hid the stars.

He would look at her, and then, to control himself, he would look up and breathe.

She lifted first one of his legs, and then the other, removing his pants. She massaged his calves. She folded and set his pants to one side.

He was nude now, and though they’d bathed together before, there had been no meaning behind his nakedness with her then.

Now he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He tipped her head to the side, and noted with satisfaction how, when his fingers grazed under her chin, she shivered. He examined the mark of his teeth. He raised his hand, but when she realized he did not move to deliver a smack to her cheek, she caught his wrist.

“Leave it,” she said.

His fingers twitched. He shouldn't. He licked his lips. The notches where he'd stressed her skin were glassy and discolored, and high on her neck, clearly visible.

"I should not..."

"Solas," she said his name, and pushed her hands, slowly, from his knees, up his thighs, and there was no question of her devotion in her gaze; she pushed her chin into his hand and kissed his palm.

He hesitated, then, he allowed her to push his thighs apart, wider, and leaned back.

Her lips first touched against the base of his cock. He was not as sensitive there, but he felt her kiss like fire. He swallowed, and swallowed again. The block still sat heavy in his throat when she kissed, next, under his cock, her lips warm. And as she slowly lifted her eyes, *oh*, to his, she took him, soft, in hand, and she sucked his cock, slowly, in between her lips.

His throat struggled around a loud, immodest, rude and desperate noise, and he saw the corners of her lips twitch.

"I will be unable to..." he started, thinking it prudent to warn her of what would be unreasonable to expect just now, no matter the skill of her attentions. "I will not harden, nor -" But she shushed him, speaking around his soft length, rolling him on her tongue.

"I've waited to be here. No, I love the feeling of you, I love you like this, soft, mine..."

The warm wet of her mouth was everywhere on him. He felt his stomach tighten as she bobbed the limp mound of his cock on her tongue. She suckled and swirled him, and he watched the bulge of him bouncing side to side in her cheeks.

He had lived too long, and he was too old, to be concerned with temporary impotence, especially drug-induced. His arousal would come back, it always did. Yet he had not expected for her to quite so clearly enjoy sucking his limp cock, and, as if with the aim of further confounding him, she told him of her satisfaction - the little games she played rendering him speechless as he swallowed the loutish drool her provocations inspired.

"The shape of you is so broad," she said as she kissed down his length, adding, "Yours is a beautiful cock," with full sincerity when she next loosed him from her lips, making a game, under his avid gaze, of seeing how long she could keep him stretched out in her lips as she pulled away, until his cock fell from her mouth and bumped back onto his balls. "I must become well-familiar with your desires, Fen'Harel - with what will please you," she promised coyly as her fingers raised, this time gently, up behind his testes. "How many soft cocks like this could I fit in my mouth at once, I wonder?" she said, and, "How many would you make me take and lick and swallow, to prove my devotion?" She sighed happily, "I can swallow you so easily now; you like to see the outline of your nice, long cock bulging in my cheek?"

"It is rude to speak with your mouth full," was all he could manage, finally, and in response she merely snorted and slipped her fingers up behind his testes, up between his cheeks, to lightly press the circle of muscle which so defeated him, utterly.

After so long yearning for her, after so many nights grabbing himself and treating his prick with frantic, punishing roughness for imagining just this, each adulation made his heart shake and jump in his chest. The way she took him, the vision of his cock disappearing into her... He collapsed into these sensations. He twisted and she held his hips in place. He touched her hair, her shoulders, and her hair again, and she patiently felt for his hands and held them. His leg bounced, and the sordid, delicious buzz of her lips around him filled his ears with a frequency like begging, and his throat

with short, helpless gasps. He bound his hips to immobility, though they quivered to slam up against the hot tightness between her teeth. He wanted to stand, secure her head in place, and fuck her mouth with his prick, soft as it was, until his seed burst from the sides of her mouth and choked her beautiful, yielding throat.

In an encore of the muffled service she'd performed when she drank her own slick from his fingers, she stroked and then sucked in turn. The bark of the stump was rough under his hands, pressed tight to his sides. His cock pulled out of her lips with a ripe '*plap*.' She grinned up at him. "Yes," she mocked, "tremble for me just so. Who would have guessed that the Walker of the Beyond would come apart so easily for a slut who simply worshipped him on her knees?"

He groaned and his chin wrenched up, this being too much - *slut* - *worship* - as her mouth poured back snug and hot over him, swallowing him with short, pulsing pressures. His lucidity was fickle, fleeting, and between the bursts of hot fullness, and wet patterns of her tongue and swollen lips, he stopped thinking of anything, stopped seeing anything, stopped being anything but the plaything of her curiosity.

*My heart*, he thought.

"*Oh*, fuck," he said, softly.

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